

HOUSE OF LIES

Mallet-Joris: A few months ago French, British and American critics alike were comparing this Flemish girl—perhaps because of her youth—with Françoise Sagan; now already she is even being spoken of in the same breath as Balzac.

This novel concerns the last battle of an old brewer to win ascendancy over his illegitimate daughter, to whom he plans to leave all his vast wealth, which is coveted by his hideously ignoble family. A major problem is to eliminate the influence of the girl's mother.

These main figures, each stubborn in a different way, are brought to life with quite superb mastery. What a psychologist this young author proves to be in her understanding of them and of the host of minor figures who fight, intrigue and jockey for position.

House of Lies is certainly the author's most mature work to date, and with it she demonstrates that she is a novelist in the great French tradition.

By the same author

INTO THE LABYRINTH

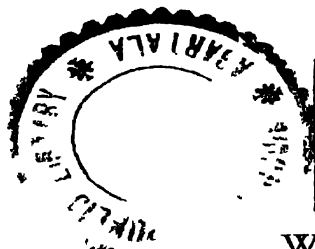
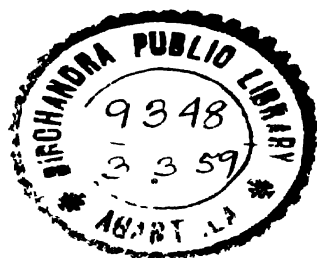
THE RED ROOM

Françoise Mallet-Joris

HOUSE OF LIES

Translated by Herma Briffault from the French

Les Mensonges



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Chapter One

EVERYTHING was grey outside, the long blank walls of the hospital, the rectangular boat basin where the water lapped softly, the houses all around, the drowsing sails. In the house with the double balcony, set like a challenge in the midst of the slums, in the master bedroom filled with cool shadow, the robust and motionless body of a man was feigning sleep.

Everything was calm, the quays, the shut warehouses, the taverns where barely flickered one faint light, and the motionless river, from which a thin mist was rising, screening the view of the floating docks where unreal-looking figures moved about.

The man's body stretched out on the oak bed still did not stir. Only the clenched fists and an occasional quivering of the bluish eyelids indicated that the old man was awake. That beating of his heart, that heavy breathing, were they perceptible in the silence of the room? It seemed to him he heard the sound.

Everything was grey outside, cold, pure, with the wind that had risen at dawn sweeping away the smells of beer, fried foods, fish, iodine, all the old and reassuring odours of humanity, even to the smell of the bed soaked with the sweat of anguish.

And in the house everyone was asleep. All at once he visualized them: Suzanne, the little maidservant, sleeping in the attic room, rolled up in a ball like a plump young animal, breathing hard and fast; Castereau, the odd-job man, resting in peace, despite his liver-trouble, his thin and yellow face at last relaxed, polluting the air with his feverish breath; the cook, her hands folded as she would fold them in death, and her account book tucked under the pillow;

on the second floor, not far from his own room, his sister, Madame Nuñez was, he imagined, breathing in the air as greedily as she ate food at table; downstairs, in the little room that opened upon the garden, there was Alberte, her white face unmoving, her dark hair neatly braided, lying with her feet together and her hands clasped, looking like one of those peaceful effigies that adorn the sepulchres.

Farther off, in one of those neat houses of the upper town, his nephew Philippe was sleeping beside his wife Simone, who in sleep could forget her ugliness and her husband's infidelities. And their daughter Louissette, that lumpish, faded blonde, no doubt was dreaming of film stars. And his nephew Roger was asleep beside his wife in an imitation Louis XV bed, and their children were asleep; and Maalens, the befuddled old book-keeper, was asleep amidst the chintz of a room at the Hotel Smyrna; and Mademoiselle Paule, the stenographer, was asleep, and Henri and Yves, his secretaries, and all those men and women that he called by their first names and commanded with a frown, the people for whom he had done so much, they and the others, the entire town around him, were sleeping a heavy and ungrateful sleep.

Motionless in the midst of this town of stone, this leaden house, he alone lived, thought, waited. And the vague anguish of the morning drew near the bed again, fond and urgent, hounding him like a nightmare.

The only ones awake, the dockers, were now arriving on the waterfront, tossing heavy crates of fruit back and forth, sturdy, well-set fellows, with thick black belts showing off their figures, unconsciously rejoicing in their measured strength and in the coolness of the summer morning. From time to time a fog-horn stirred up a few sea gulls. Something creaked in the hold of a tanker. A fallen lemon gleaned for a few minutes in the shade. A grey sail moved away. Again, a moment of silence. Somewhere on the shore the sea thrashed the bones of birds.

Renouncing pretence, the prone body turned over, the hoarse breathing became louder, the eyes opened at last. An arm marked with wrinkles, scars, and the brown flecks of old age, rose up, dominating that mass of heavy flesh . . . and fell down again.

"Seventy years old," he thought. "Ten more years, perhaps, to live. . . ."

Every morning, always hoping to encounter a bright ray of light, his first glance sought the window and found it darker. Yet it was summer. A bad summer, true, with fogs interspersed with showers and pale rays of sunshine. . . . What time was it? Seven o'clock, or six, perhaps? Every morning he woke up earlier. And these spells of breathlessness, this weight on his chest, these lancinating pains in the left arm. . . . "Nothing but rheumatism," said Roger. "Aggravated by nerves, of course, and a touch of quinsy. Nothing very serious. You can live a hundred years at the rate you're going."

Daylight, at last. A footstep under the window. Soon he would hear the postman's whistle, the jangling of the milkman's cans, the banging of the black doors of the warehouses, the moaning of the factory siren. Yet, no. Silence fell again. He had evidently wakened up even earlier than yesterday.

"I must ask Roger to increase the dose," he said under his breath, and at once remembered with distaste how many times he had pronounced those words in the past two years. Sedatives, nothing but sedatives, then a little morphine. . . .

That spasmodic pain, for awhile overcome, had manifested itself anew, after giving him some weeks of respite. It was an absurd anguish, reasonless, unjust, and he blazed with anger at that injustice. He would consult another physician, one that would make him well again. Was it because Roger was his nephew that he could not believe. . . ? But Roger told him that he would soon be shipshape, that nothing much was the matter, and he must have reason to believe that. He must be a good physician, had a twofold reason to be a good physician since he, Klaes van Baarnheim, commanded him to be. But Klaes could not command sleep. And the anguish was still in the room, mockingly whispering something about the accelerated beating of this disturbed old heart, counting the pulsations of this childish terror.

Full of wrath, he managed with great effort to pull up the heavy mass of his powerful torso and shoulders into a sitting posture. This way, he could hold out better against these vague phantoms,

comparable only to those phantoms that steal into the most untroubled childhoods, like a nameless face peering for a moment through a door left ajar. The whispering died down; the anguish moved off, beat a retreat, grappled again for a moment, then his heart beat slower, his breathing became easier, and he was on the point of exorcising the pain and terror completely when he chanced to see himself in the mirror that faced the bed. There he was, bent forward, his brows gathered in a frown, all his muscles straining in the ridiculous effort of struggling against the invisible and non-existent.

The absurd image filled him with rage.

"It's their fault," he muttered wrathfully. "It's their fault!" And turning to the side of the bed, he began with both hands to press the electric bells which communicated with all the rooms of the house. Not one bedroom or cubbyhole where his presence was not asserted by means of that shrill, imperative sound. Frenziedly, almost gleefully, he pressed the bells, imagining the entire household being snatched brutally from sleep, dressing in haste, getting into a panic. Everywhere in the echoing old house the bells rang again and again, sparing no one, even shattering the silence in the empty rooms. Soon doors were banging, voices were being raised; he could hear the sharp falsetto of Madame Nuñez, the deep voice of Alberte, the eager chattering of Suzanne. In a minute they would all be there, hurrying to attend him, to anticipate his least desires, surrounding him with that tumult and artificial life which he needed like new blood. In a moment he would again be the most loved of fathers, brothers, masters, the centre of that panic uproar, the pivot round which this household turned. Then there would be the siren of the brewery, and those hundreds of men who worked for him, thanks to him. His secretary would bring some files, his nephew Philippe would come to take his orders for the day, the boss of the trade union would ask for a rise, a competitor would ask for aid. There would be the poor who came daily for help, they must be talked to and relief handed out. He would discuss, decide, triumph. His loud imperious laughter, his jovial outbursts of anger would fill the house: the living day would begin. This nameless body,

struggling against obscure powers, would be Klaes van Baarnheim again and forever.

With a sigh of relief, he let himself sink back on his pillows.

From the dining-room window, looking across the boat basin where the damaged boats slumbered, you could see the hospital. To the left, the red pushcart of the hot cooked tripe man set a bright note of colour against the white wall. Sitting beside that open window, the old man could hear a great sad murmur issuing from the direction of the hospital where a crowd of people were waiting for the doors to open, a mingling of anxious voices—clattering of tin lunch-boxes—many of the labourers brought their lunch and ate it standing, while waiting for the hospital visiting hour—and an almost continual shuffling of feet, like the stamping of patient cattle.

"I must have them put a bench there," Klaes reflected. "I'll speak about it to Dr. Franck. It'll help the people to wait."

The hospital door finally opened, revealing a dusty courtyard shaded by three plane-trees, and the crowd slowly entered, hurried along by a few self-important young students.

Klaes contentedly drank his coffee.

"Philippe," he said, "make a note. They must have a bench in front of the hospital. Get the town council's authority first. I'll foot the bill. Those poor devils have to eat standing up, and I won't have that."

"It seems to me," said Philippe coldly, "that this is more a job for Henri." He did not like to be considered as an employee of his uncle.

"Henri. Oh, yes, Henri. I've something else to talk about to him!"

He took a few painful steps towards the big table piled with papers. The minute he tried to move this over-stout body of his, he became breathless. First it had been his rather short legs that had put on fat, then his paunch, then his once strong and muscular arms, then his great shoulders which, in his young days, had allowed him to pass for a giant as long as he remained sitting down behind his

desk. And now the fat, like a ruthless tide, had submerged his whole body, even his powerful neck which the wenches, in the old days, had liked to hug and kiss. His body had been transformed into an impotent mass of flesh. Only the head and face had escaped the disaster, surmounting it with the bold, large-featured ugliness of a Mussolini, his purple-veined eyelids, half-shut, revealing the glimmer of his imperious yellow eyes, his rough hair that was still abundant and dark—together a face still capable of holding spell-bound his relatives, servants, and employees, who felt the force that continued, at times, to emanate from this imposing ruin.

— And now Henri Beck was waiting in front of the desk. His round face beneath a head of curly hair wore a dazed and sheepish look, his waistcoat was garish, his hands loutish, and everything about him breathed a stupid self-assurance.

"Obviously, the poor fellow can only inspire antipathy," reflected Philippe, who had settled himself comfortably in a far corner of the room and was observing the scene with amusement. "He is born for this type of bad luck. What a frightful checked tie! What dreadful shoes! But well-meaning and, in the long run, an honest lad. But heavens! A complete nobody!"

"Why, sir," the secretary said in a choked voice that tried to speak with dignity, "you authorized me to, several times. I didn't think I was doing anything to displease you. . . ."

"Come, come, my lad," Klaes van Baarnheim said, rubbing his hands together with a fearful joviality, "on what occasion did I authorize you to drop into the till for an advance on your salary!"

"It was when my mother was sick that you had the kindness to. . . ."

"The kindness!" Klaes van Baarnheim guffawed. "I'm glad you deign to recognize it. But from your accounts, I seemed to get the impression that you found it quite natural? The kindness! Thankless wretch," he thundered suddenly. "Because I helped you, pulled you out of your poverty, out of the mud, the gutter. Don't interrupt me! You repay me by robbing my till! And you consider that an excuse? Because I consented occasionally, when confronted with your deceitful laments—was your mother even

sick, or do you even have a mother?—because I consented to help you, you consider you have the right to plunder me, to regard my purse as if it were your own, expect it to be open to you always, and you dip into it to gamble on horses, run after the girls, or I don't know what. Why, that being the case, Henri Beck, all the beggars in town would have the right to do the same!"

The secretary straightened up, in a pitiful attempt at dignity. "Accustomed to the tempests unleashed by Klaes van Baarnheim over the least peccadillo, his dull brain had not yet been able to perceive in the imperious voice that disquieting note of accentuated joviality which indicated the desire on the part of the brewer to cut the matter short.

"All the same, sir," he persisted in his whining voice, "it concerned my salary, the price of my labour."

A gigantic burst of laughter interrupted him.

"His salary! You hear that, Philippe? He actually said the word, his salary! This is the fellow I found in the street, on the verge of suicide, ready to beg his bread, a fellow I've fed, lodged, clothed—he was in rags, Philippe, do you remember?—a lad I've treated like a son. He was incapable of doing anything. With the patience of an angel I taught him a trade. A good-for-nothing that I've turned into a person of importance in the community, my successor, perhaps! If he'd behaved well—and this fellow comes to lay claim to a salary!" The old man's tone became suddenly gentler, almost plaintive, as he went on. "Oh, Henri, Henri, I had a fondness for you, my lad! And now you've disappointed me, very cruelly."

Philippe said to himself irreverently, "Stuff and nonsense! He hasn't had such fun for a long time."

Meanwhile the young fellow had plucked up a little courage and was trying with maladroitness and aggressive volubility to make himself heard.

"Why, sir, then tell me what you really reproach me for. It's impossible, after all! You urged me to it a hundred times. . . . If I've done something against you, say frankly what it is. I've always tried to give satisfaction. I don't understand."

"No, poor fellow, you don't understand," Philippe inwardly

commented. "Otherwise you wouldn't put yourself to so much pains. Can't you see that your fate's settled and that everything you may do to prolong the agony merely amuses him at your expense?"

"No, no, Henri," the brewer was saying in a gentler tone, "you may talk till you're blue in the face, it's no use. . . . Well, why did you do it?"

"Sir, when I've told you what it's all about, I'm sure you'll understand," said the secretary who thought the game was won and was already holding his head higher. "It concerns a girl—oh, of excellent family—that I was supposed to go out with. One of the Gysels, a daughter of Gysels the notary." He puffed out his chest. "And I didn't have a dinner suit. . . . A daughter of Maître Gysels! You see what I mean? She's paid me marked attentions, sir. I'm telling you this because I always confide in you, you're like a father to me. . . . It's not official yet . . . but she certainly has shown she likes me. And I thought. . . ."

"One of Gysels' daughters," the old man muttered reflectively. "And it was to take out a girl you don't love, that you can't love, it was to capture her fortune by the lowest means. . . . When I think that you dare to brag about the attentions an unfortunate girl has shown you! And it was for this, you pitiful little climber, that you pillaged and betrayed your benefactor? Now see here, Henri," he went on, giving the young man who had lost all his vainglory a crushing look, "if you'd told me, 'I took that money to pay the expenses of an evening out with a girl I'm in love with, a good, simple girl, from whom I expect nothing,' I might perhaps have forgiven you. But to see you again exhibiting your vile, mean, self-seeking character—that's too much. Even a father—since you dare bestow the name upon me and by so doing repudiate your own father, that worthy and unassuming working-man—even a father would not do more than I'm now doing. You will find your bags packed and ready in your room, bags much heavier than when you began working here! You will also find, in an envelope, what you dared to call your salary. Take away with you the clothes I gave you, the money you've not earned, and also take with

you my forgiveness, Henri. But never set foot in this house again! For if you do, I might give you a piece of my mind!"

Mute and motionless, open-mouthed, round-eyed, the poor sheep was really quite a pitiful sight. All his self-sufficiency had left him, he was as if suddenly deflated, and the loud suit, the famous checked tie were singularly at odds with his stricken face and attitude. Philippe took it upon himself to lead him out. When he returned, Klaes van Baarnheim was lounging in his armchair, seemingly relaxed.

"I rang for beer," he said cheerfully. "Oh, what hardships and deceptions, when we try to do good!"

Mentally, Philippe commented, "On the contrary, what fun! How this way of doing good rejuvenates an old man!"

Klaes, poor old chap, must have been pretty horrified that day when he found he had reached the end of his desires: possessing a brewery working at top speed, a couple of valuable properties, important shares in the Damiaen Bank, not to mention two cars, what more could he want? For Klaes had no imagination, you had to admit. A few mistresses, a great deal of money, some fake primitives—that represented the meagre spoils of seventy years of life. Fortunately, he had disclosed, in the past few years, some unexpected signs of good-heartedness. He financed Dr. Franck's clinic, gave relief to the poor—even welcoming them, marvel of marvels, to table, right under his own roof.

As for his protégés, Philippe had seen a crowd of these favourites of a day, a week, a month—to date, the record of endurance was held by a Hungarian pianist who had stuck it out for three months. And when they first appeared, how delighted they were at being so generously pitied by the old brewer, so luxuriously housed, so adored and showered with favours! And how they returned their benefactor's affection! How they gave him the best of themselves! How, mistrustful at first, they gradually came to confide their most intimate thoughts to him, their most secret desires! And how the old man understood and appreciated them, and how he, moved at his own generosity, encompassed them in his universe! He encompassed not only them but their piano, their bankrupt café or lace-

works, their lame sister or old mother—until the time came when, for a word, a gesture, an aspiration, or simply because he had sucked them dry, he cast them back into oblivion, refusing them one single day more beneath his roof, shattering their careers, demanding the repayment of a loan which had on both parts been considered a gift, taking the crutch away from the lame sister, the allowance from the blind mother, and finishing off the job by treating them all as “ingrates” who were only out for his money!

And, Philippe reflected, as he surveyed the old face that had relaxed, “he does all this with the conviction that he is a benefactor of humanity!” Yes, he had all this pleasure with a good conscience—and when you came down to it, at so little cost! It would have cost him more to keep a ballerina as a mistress—but what ballerina could have given him such a range of satisfactions as this? For he ran the whole gamut, beginning with self-contentment (the unfortunate one tells the story of his life), then the sensation of having swung a good business deal (he has bought a soul as if it were a pair of sheets, for a drowning person worships the life-buoy), the pleasure of discovery (“The ingrate!”), of contempt (“All men are alike!”), of self-pity (“I, who pulled him out of his primeval slime!”), and finally indignation (“Get out, you scoundrel!”), not to mention the forgiveness generously granted the miserable creature whose life is ruined.

With cashiers, secretaries, book-keepers, servants, or simple fools, it always went through the same process, which sometimes rendered the conducting of business quite difficult. What did it matter! Klaes van Baarnheim could afford it. This was his one luxury. And moreover, the ones who remained were no less to be pitied. Not that he, Philippe, complained; by nature as much as by need he was a general factotum, parasite and purveyor. But by what miracle of patience did the others endure the old fellow’s tyranny and above all his insufferable requirement that everyone around him should be, or appear to be, happy! It gave them all an artificial, strained, sick smile which amused Philippe. You would have said the entire household was in uniform, and a uniform a little too tight at the seams, giving them the stiff look of manikins. Moreover, Klaes

liked to surround himself with deformities; there were moments when the house was a veritable asylum for human remains. There had been one who limped, another who stammered, still another who was epileptic. A disabled person is so much more vulnerable, so much easier to soften and savour than another man! Thus thought Philippe, not without bitterness.

Of course, you could also call this benevolence. . . .

"Ah, here's the beer!" said the old brewer with satisfaction. "It's the new brew, my dear Philippe. Eighteen degrees! It's made specially for me and my friends. Oh, if I wanted to put it on the market, we'd beat even Guinness without trying. And I'm not saying I'll not do it one of these days."

They drank in silence, sitting opposite each other, strangely different. The brewer was imposing, despite his slightly sagging shoulders, he was massive, with enormous hands, his still dark hair was thick, and his heavy eyelids gave him the mask of a lion. Philippe, despite his forty years, had a still youthful look, there was still the look of a young man about the nape of his neck, the slim and elegant figure, the well groomed hands, the alert and quiet movements. Only his face, where the lines of bitterness, sensual enjoyment, irony, betrayed more than anything an immense boredom, and also his eyes, which even spite did not succeed in animating, seemed a hundred years old.

"I almost forgot," the old man said suddenly. "What about our affair?"

"What affair?" said Philippe, surprised.

"Why, that unfortunate woman. . . . Come, now, you were supposed to go see her, weren't you?"

"I didn't think you were as engrossed as all that with the subject," said Philippe, laughing. "Yes, I've seen her, and have told her of your generous intentions."

"Well?"

The brewer's manner poorly concealed an impatience that astounded Philippe.

"Well, you needn't have any more scruples about her. She doesn't want that money, she doesn't want to leave the neighbour-

hood, in short, she likes it very well as she is. I must admit that she did not seem to me to be entirely . . . shall we say, in her right mind? But her words were very clear."

"See here, Philippe, you're joking. You mean to say she asks for a delay? Or she wants to be paid more? It's either one or the other, you're not going to tell me. . . ."

"I must say, I was as surprised as you are," Philippe said unconcernedly. "I expected to see her jump at the chance. But after all, if she doesn't want to leave. . . ."

"It must be that she didn't understand what you wanted of her. She thought we wanted to drive her off, to evict her, when the fact of the matter is that we want only to assure a better life for her, a more dignified, more. . . ."

"I repeat, she understood quite well. I went so far as to hand her the banknotes, and she shoved them away. It was very clear."

The brewer remained silent, as if dumbfounded.

"Come, come," he muttered presently, "it's impossible. She must be insane!"

Philippe almost burst out laughing. Naturally, anyone who refused his uncle's benefactions must be crazy. This rage to do good seemed to Philippe a little suspect. "Why yes, my dear uncle," he wanted to say but did not, "Yes, there are people on earth who don't mind their drunkenness and poverty at all, and who have no need of you. Hard to swallow, isn't it? And perhaps, even, there are people who don't envy you the fine position you've made for yourself with such effort. They dare to be happy in their misery! What immorality!"

"Then why worry any more about what happens to her?" he said hypocritically. "You've done more than your duty, Uncle Klaes. You've given the daughter a home, you pay a small allowance to the mother, what else could be expected of you? If that woman is satisfied with things as they are. . . ."

"Satisfied with things as they are!" Klaes fumed. "Why, it's unthinkable! It's. . . ." He tried to find a word to express his indignation and gave up. "No, Philippe. There's something behind all this. She's trying to do me harm, I tell you. I have no one but

friends in this town, but your Aunt Odilia was telling me only yesterday that on account of that unfortunate woman some people are circulating quite dreadful rumours about me."

"Oh, the good soul," Philippe mentally commented, amused. The brewer's sister Odilia—Madame Nuñez to the household—was able, on occasion, to have her tiny revenges for the exasperating tributes Klaes expected of her in payment for the home he had given her when she was widowed.

"Or else," the brewer ruminated, "or else it's a trick. Yes, she can't be as crazy as all that. It's a scheme to get more out of me. In a word, yes, a kind of blackmail." He chuckled. Klaes' moods changed quickly. And also, in the field of argument, he felt at home.

"We're fools, Philippe. That woman isn't as stupid as she looks. I'll send Alberte to talk to her presently. She'll know how to handle her mother."

"You think so?"

"Indeed, I do. Alberte's a fine girl. I don't regret having taken that child in. She knows what she owes me, she's reserved and discreet. . . ."

Other men keep dogs or monkeys, he had said, so why should he not take care of that little daughter of his? The "little daughter" must have been fourteen or fifteen at the time. A waitress in the Three Storks tavern, like her mother. They said she looked a great deal like Klaes van Baarnheim, had his build, his dark hair. The mother, while making a show of reluctance, had been all too willing to get rid of the girl, in exchange for a small allowance. Philippe had negotiated the affair, at his uncle's request, with some anxiety over this vagary. Might not the girl win the capricious affection of the old man and take possession of the heritage which should by rights go to him, to Madame Nuñez, and to Madame Nuñez' son, Roger? But after interesting himself for a few days in this taciturn young daughter of his, whose name was Bertha but whom he had baptised Alberte, Klaes had lost interest. That was six years ago. For six years the girl had been there, living in the house, acting as nurse to the old man, as taciturn as ever, but getting prettier every day. It had been six years since that day when Philippe had brought

her to the house in the big limousine with the pearl grey upholstery. Even then, she had been a pretty child, with a body mature for her age, and an inscrutable face that badly feigned indifference. In reality, her eyes had devoured the car, the aloof chauffeur, then the house, with its big rooms filled with gleaming furniture. While waiting for Klaes, Philippe had attempted—he still recalled it—a rather rough embrace. But she had repulsed him without anger, shoving him off with a shrug and a wrench of the hip, curiously like that of any tavern waitress repulsing the indiscreet hand of a male customer.

Strange child. From time to time Philippe still observed her with amused interest. It was that hint of constraint about her that attracted him. Not a very clever girl, she so visibly forced herself not to commit a blunder of any kind, so visibly adopted an attitude she must consider dignified and in keeping with the house she admired. . . . And at the same time, now and then, a gesture or look betrayed that health, that zest for life which must have come from her father, and that violently sensual nature of which she no doubt was unconscious. Philippe judged her to be very desirable. Not because she was beautiful—he was not that naïve. But her restrained energy, her sensuality kept in check by something painful and secret, fascinated him. He sensed beneath her pathetic and rather laughable effort at “disinction,” as beneath the unconscious but rude vitality, some hidden humiliation, some wound, of which she was perhaps unaware. . . . The only pleasure that still stirred this forty-year-old surfeited with provincial debaucheries, was his probing interest in human nature.

It was a disinterested pleasure, moreover, so distinct from desire that at that very moment he was observing with the same fascination the anxiety and indignation which the least resistance bred in his uncle. That new puckering of the lip, the shifting anxiety in the depths of those redoubtable little amber eyes, so often tyrannical, the imperceptible weakening of the proud forehead, moved him. He was as moved as he would have been by the premonitory signs of ecstasy on the face of a woman. He liked to analyze people's faces. In this use of his mind, as with any faculty exercised

at the expense of others, he had acquired a remarkable keenness of perception. It procured for him, also, the pleasures that some too systematically pursued excesses no longer afforded him. The slightest intimacy or secret understanding between people apparently most indifferent to each other, a hostility as disguised as possible, a desire ignored even by the person who felt it, were apparent to him as if by second sight. Like a geologist who picks up a stone and with it reconstitutes a world that has passed away, all he needed to perceive an intimacy, a break-up, or an aversion were those crinklings of eyelids, those quiverings of lips, those almost imperceptible alterations that an emotion brings to a face. This vice that had become a gift had helped him get on in the world. For there are businessmen who resemble certain men in love: they have but to evoke the object of their desires to experience an emotion, a disturbance, which they try in vain to hide. The lover of money is no less emotive than other lovers. Philippe had only to notice the frown of a business associate, or the way such and such a banker rubbed his hands together, to sense a lurking deception, a lie, an elementary trick, and without difficulty he triumphed over those fat men entangled in their artless wickedness. His amusement was such that he was always tempted to let the affair drop and not use his advantage. It almost gave him enough pleasure just to hear the important man floundering for words, put out of countenance beneath Philippe's penetrating gaze, it was almost enough just to realize that the man in the thick glasses was as upset as a schoolboy, with his damp hands and shortness of breath, almost enough just to experience the uneasy feeling of penetrating with ease into a secret domain. But the idea of duty always came back with the recollection of his wife Simone, his daughter Louisette, his mistress Clara, and he would conclude one of those profitable and slightly crooked deals that lurked behind the genial façade of his firm, The Brenner Stores, Furniture and Decorating.

On the present occasion, the idea of duty brought him back to Klaes van Baarnheim, a certain source of income, who was saying, "You went about it all wrong, Philippe. That woman who handed over her daughter to me in exchange for a monthly allow-

ance, will not refuse the sum I offer her to leave the neighbourhood. Alberte will go at once to see her and repeat my proposition."

"And supposing she refuses again?" said Philippe roguishly.

Klaes was always so sure that everything would move out of his way! It would be not unpleasant to see him one day stumble on a pebble, be duped by someone.

"She'll not refuse," said the old brewer, with a half smile: "It'll be enough to forget to remit her allowance once or twice. Unless, that is. . . ."

"Unless?"

"Unless she's really trying to defraud me. But that's quite unlikely, I imagine? After all I've done for her and for Alberte, she'd have to be insane. And if she is insane. . . ."

"Well?"

"If she's insane, for God's sake, it's another matter. In her own interest it would perhaps be better to. . . ."

For a few minutes he reflected. "Good old uncle," thought Philippe with sympathy, "he's capable of having the woman locked up. She's a nuisance to him, blocks his way. And what marvellous candour! 'For her own good'! I'm sure he considers that Elsa is behaving very cruelly with him. Not to accept his money!" Philippe was at least not bored, for he was amused at the foolishness of this rich and powerful man who thought himself happy and to whom the least resistance—that tenacious dust, that grain of sand—took on mountainous proportions, against which the old fighter used all his strength.

Klaes van Baarnheim had recovered his zest for life. There was a great deal of the child in him, he was soon upset, soon diverted; and childish, too, were his appetite for gain, for victory, and that joyous ferocity of his which made his business deals a fascinating and cruel game. Now he was gaily leafing through some folders on his table. He had always liked to work as others like to eat, working greedily, hours on end. Few secretaries could stick it out.

"Well now," said Philippe, seeing that Klaes was absorbed in thought, "I'll leave you."

"That's right. Till tomorrow, Philippe. Send Henri to me, will



you? Oh, no, I forgot!" He shouted with laughter, that great Olympian laughter, all his good humour having returned. "Henri. He'll be packing his suitcase, the beggar! Send Yves to me, if he's in the house. A fine fellow, that one. I'm going to give him a rise."

He was entirely himself again, distributing his favours and furies with an unfairness that was truly divine.

"See you tomorrow, Uncle. Did you hit it off with the trade union?"

"Very well."

"Did you make some concessions?"

"None."

Philippe chuckled as he closed the door. Not yet at the end of his tether, the old fox. He might act like a spoiled child, but he was still sound. He would spend a good while "developing his production," arguing with his workmen, hanging around the brewery, where everything went on very well without him, he would crush an unfortunate competitor. . . . A happy man. Happy? All the same, a grain of sand, an Elsa, was enough to disturb him. And also he was a little saturated with worldly goods. "A few months from now he really won't know what more to want," said Philippe to himself. And he called to mind the wrinkles of age that were each day ploughed deeper on his uncle's face, heard again the laboured breathing, pondered upon the disquieting prognostic of Roger . . . "He's lived his life," thought Philippe, philosophically. "He can die, now." Then too, his sense of family obligations whispered, it would certainly arrange things for him, Philippe. What the devil! Everything was as it should be.

Chapter Two

"**T**HAT will do for today, my boy," Klaes van Baarnheim said, with a contented sigh. "You have the receipts, have you not?"

Though the brewer maintained a formal attitude when addressing his nephew, whom he did not at all like but whose usefulness he recognized, he was apt to be patronizingly informal with his second secretary, who managed with less competence the affairs entrusted to him. Klaes took pleasure in having beneath his thumb the son and heir of the Sarfati family which had been ruined ten years previously, but was once a family of the first rank in the town of A, for he still recalled how its prestige had haunted his youthful years. There was nothing about Yves Sarfati to intimidate him. From this slender and good-looking young man, dressed with almost exaggerated correctness, Klaes need fear no rebellion and effortlessly made him submit to his oppressive benevolence; indeed, Yves flinched at the least noise.

"Nothing else, sir?"

"I believe not. Oh, yes. You will tell Maalens that he is not to remit the allowance to Elsa Damiaen this month. We'll see. . . ."

"Very well, sir."

Yves Sarfati asked for no explanation; indeed, he never did. He had been twelve years old when the catastrophe had occurred to his family, and from those events—the sudden financial ruin, the flight of his mother, the sale of the furniture, the abandonment of the luxurious home on the Quai aux Marchands and the transfer of himself and his father to a little room near the warehouses, the

difficulties of his schooling (gone were the days when he had been excused from all effort by his mother, who always said, "Yves is so frail"), he had retained a nervousness, a constant apprehension of things and people (supposing everything crumbled again) which he concealed as best he could under an almost priggish look. The old financier's flair had not deceived him as to that. Beneath Yves' impassive face and behind those dark blue eyes of his, the flaw existed, like a wound, ready to reopen. And Yves was not without his match in the brewer's collection. There was Maalens, the idiot who idolized his master and whom that master correspondingly tormented, there was Suzanne, the little wanton, ready to pass from hand to hand, always gay, always corruptible, sticking out her tongue at one person, flinging a retort at another, bullying the men servants whom she ruled with a rod of iron; Suzanne, in short, acted the part of court-fool, or, better still, she was, in that household, the little monkey often seen in Dutch still-lives, peering sadly and vacantly out of the corner of a picture. Then, there was Madame Nuñez, Klaes' sister, who put a good front on her ruined finances and her widowhood, but was tormented over being only a dependent sheltered under her brother's roof; and her son, Dr. Roger Nuñez, in regular attendance upon Klaes and the scapegoat of his sleepless nights. There was also Mademoiselle Paule, the stenographer, whose frail shoulders were so bowed with humility that she was often taken for a hunchback. And there was Alberte, with her look of constraint. Klaes liked the idea of being the arbiter of these slightly infirm destinies. Upon the whole, aside from occasional crude jokes on this score, he looked after their welfare. "I want everyone around me to be happy," he said. The trouble was that he could not endure the idea of their being happy without him.

"Henri's leaving," he said abruptly.

Yves had turned his back to tidy up the files, and the brewer did not remark the pallor that suddenly swept over his face.

"So you have nothing to say?" Klaes pursued, maliciously. "You don't ask why? What have you got to say about it?"

Yves had nothing to say. he did not even think of saying anything.

He was afraid, that was all he knew, afraid with an unreasoned and unreasonable fear that paralyzed him, making him wait tensely for the blow, the announcement that he, too. . . . But Klaes' heavy hands fell upon his shoulders.

"My word, he's quite pale!" said the old man, with a guffaw. "Do you, by any chance, imagine. . . ? What an idiot you are! Yes, you're going to have more work to do, but you'll draw Henri's pay, that's all there is to it. Now, feel sorry for yourself after that!"

"But, sir, I'm not capable. . . ."

"You're perfectly capable. And while you're getting the hang of things, your old boss will lend you a hand. It's a promise. You begin, tomorrow, to take over the job, and along with it, his room on the street floor, and now I don't want to hear any more about that fellow."

"Sir, you see. . . ."

"Now what?"

"It's. . . . You see, my father is sick, and I don't like. . . ."

"You like, you don't like. . . . This is what comes of helping people! Well now, since I'm in a good humour, I'll pay the costs of a nurse for your father. And if he's really in a bad state, I'll get him a room at Dr. Franck's clinic. I give enough money to those people to. . . . Good, good, don't thank me. You'd do better to help me climb the stairs."

Leaning on the thin shoulder of the young man, Klaes slowly climbed the monumental stairway. Only a few weeks before, he had still been able to climb the stairs without assistance. But ever since the beginning of spring he had had curious pains in the heart, and the familiar twinge in his left shoulder had become aggravated, so that he now must have someone to lean on, since he could not bring himself to use a cane. Arrived in his bedroom, he let himself down on the bed.

"Thank you, my lad. We've done a good job today, you and I, haven't we?"

"Yes, sir. Allow me to thank you again. . . ."

"Don't be idiotic. It's only natural. Send Suzanne to me."

Yves disappeared.

With a sigh of relief, the brewer stretched out more comfortably on the dark red velvet counterpane. He was not dissatisfied with his day: Henri fired, Yves raised, affairs at the brewery going well, the holdings he had in property bringing in a regular profit, diamonds. . . . Diamonds were dropping on the market, despite Philippe's predictions. He very nearly felt like complaining over not having enough work to do. There was still. . . . But that, too, would be settled. Alberte must already be on her way to see her mother, she would persuade her without difficulty. And if Alberte failed, the withdrawal of the allowance. . . .

Suzanne was slow in arriving. Impatiently he started to stretch out his arm to ring the bell, but the pain returned, imperious, holding his entire left side in its vice, and he lay motionless. Yes, everything would be fixed up. He recalled the innumerable demands for money that creature Elsa had made. Only last week one of those improbable Nile-green envelopes she used had come to him. With all that money, he told himself bitterly, she could have set up in a shop. Come, come, he was not going to think about Elsa. There had been enough other mistresses. . . .

• "And never any difficulty, never!" he reflected with annoyance. He had generally chosen them rather poor—so as to have no complications. And he had had none. On the contrary, some of them still wrote to thank him. Yvonne, the one he had put into a sanatorium. Ada, for whom he had bought a little shop in the Arcades. And that widow, whose name he had forgotten, what a fine position he had procured for her son! And this Elsa made so bold as to. . . .

Suddenly he could see her again in his mind's eye, as he had seen her that first time. Her ridiculous permanent, frizzed by the village hairdresser, her outrageous lipstick, badly put on, her film-star make-up, and with all that, her pretty, soft, banal country-girl face. And that big patent-leather handbag with its nickel fastener that she carried with what she thought was an air of distinction. Skinny, sick looking. No, when you came to think about it, not even pretty. Those rhinestone earrings! And the way she swayed back

and forth as she talked, eternally relating how she had left the farm where she helped her uncle, because she "wasn't made for that." And in the city also she had not been satisfied. Dazzled, of course, by the lights, the shiny bars, the easy, romantic life of the port, the signal-horns of the mail-packets, the drunken sailors, the popular songs, the fascinating conversations of her new women friends, brilliant, sparkling with cheap jewellery and cheap love affairs. But she had soon found that this was not worthy of her either. The insufficient food, the cupboard-like room where she had to sleep. . . . And then, people made fun of her country accent, her bad taste in clothes. . . . For she was badly rigged out, to boot. After so many years, in a dusty corner of his memory, he could still see the pale pink dress with the little white rosettes that she was wearing that day—the neckline revealed her collar-bones. What in the world could have drawn him to that girl? Really, he could not remember what. He was not good at self-analysis.

If he had reflected, he would have found this: it was the eager gaze she had turned upon him, that hungry look, which became one of surprise, then of dazzlement. What! This well dressed, prosperous looking, respectable man, already fifty years old—but the popular magazines were full of seductive fifty-year-olds with whom young girls solaced their wounded hearts—this man was speaking to her, was trying to pick her up? It confirmed her in the good opinion she had of herself, an opinion that had been slightly shaken during this period of famine. At last, everything she had always dreamed of was happening: she was going to become a lady! Her pitiful pride spread itself. And he . . . he, too, had been proud to realize how instantly he had won her. To enter into that poor life and transfigure it as if by magic, that was what had marvellously flattered him. He had felt he was the best of men; he had wished her nothing but good. He would give her a few unforgettable weeks, then he would pay her off, or he would buy a little shop or something for her. Thanks to him, she would be happy. Once more he would have transformed a life which, without him, would have been dull and miserable.

He had led off his prize, and she had experienced the fleeting pride

of being taken out by a man who was well known, who was spoken to by everybody. She had triumphed over the women friends they met by chance. They had dined in a restaurant. Her peasant's eyes had fallen on the bill (which he, moreover, had barely hid) and she had been overcome with respect. They went, then, to the cinema. Elsa was moved by the film, for she could easily identify herself with Greta Garbo.

Two hours later they had gone up the stairs of the Hôtel d'Angleterre together, and it had amused him greatly, although he did not show it, to see the haughty air she had as she passed the lift boy. "Poor girl," he had thought, "she is content with very little." For the Hôtel d'Angleterre was not very much, to him. The poverty of Elsa had revived his desire. He had always chosen poor mistresses, whom he could please at little cost. They had gone into the bedroom.

And for a last time Elsa's body—a little thin, a little grey—had struggled beneath the victorious weight. For a moment, an anxiety had crossed her poor little mind, to be extinguished in the absurd pride of being a woman. That was all. Her destiny, that night, had been fixed, like a pinned butterfly. Everything would follow in logical sequence; she would never again have to worry about anything.

Indeed, there had been a few happy weeks. He had taken her to second-class restaurants where she posed as a queen, parading in her constantly flashier dresses. Apparently she desperately admired him. These weeks had seemed to him like those spent with other mistresses; everything had evolved normally. Then . . . even at the thought of it, he felt his wrath and indignation rise again. . . . Then, there came the day when he had gently given her to understand—with some circumspection, even—that the best things in life come to an end, that he was a busy man, that he was no longer going to devote his time to her—ordinarily he did not employ so many circumlocutions; he had been too nice to her, that was the source of all the trouble. He had told her she need not worry, that he would take care of her. She had only to speak: would she rather have a tidy little sum which would permit her to go back

to the country and marry someone? Or would she rather have a good job in an office? Say, even some responsible work with a future?

He had expected an explosion of joy, perhaps mingled with a few decent regrets, but not that fixed ingratitude. Had she not even gone so far as to declare that she wanted none of his money? That he had betrayed her? (And yet he had been careful not to promise her anything!) He had made another effort (still with too much kindness) to calm her. But she had poured out torrents of abuse upon him, all her thin little body shaking with wrath putting on a ridiculous show of dignity, and a sly little wounded pride, which made her pronounce the most disagreeable words the brewer had heard in a long time. A girl picked up in the port, right in the Triangle, a girl from the country, half-starved, who mistook the Hôtel d'Angleterre for a first-class luxury hotel, a girl who was dressed up like an organ grinder's monkey! He, too, had used hard words. To be through with it, he had offered her three thousand francs. That was a sum of money at the time. But he had taken into account that she was a virgin. And then, he had wanted to be through with her. She had ended up by accepting, naturally. Three thousand francs—that was too much to refuse. For her, it was an enormous sum.

Klaes' relief had been great. Something in this affair had been particularly disagreeable to him. When you feel particularly benevolent towards the whole world, it is always unpleasant to note that the world does not feel kindly towards you. He had made haste to forget, as you forget, with a certain feeling of humiliation, a dog that has bitten you. And a few weeks later, when a letter from Elsa had informed him that she was pregnant, he had not worried about it; whether true or false, it was something money could deal with. That was the important thing. And he had again sent money.

"Although I didn't even know if the child was mine, please note," he was fond of saying. "But a child is a child, so I didn't haggle."

Long years had passed. He forgot Elsa. No one remembered

except the accountant, Maalens, who handled the money, remitting every year a sum which should serve for the upbringing of the little girl whose very name Klaes did not know.

The first time he had felt any curiosity about the child had been some six or seven years ago. He had heard once or twice that the child resembled him. He had paid no attention. But at about the age of sixty, when he had felt the first twinges of his rheumatism, he had begun to tell himself that after all if this child was his daughter, he should do something for her, perhaps.

"And I did. I did, and I'll do still more."

He had promised to settle a dowry upon her if she remained with him until the age of twenty-five. If he sent her back home before that, she would nevertheless have something. It was a generous offer; everyone said so.

He began to laugh, almost out loud. How people had stared, wondered, and whispered, the first time he had taken his natural daughter out for a walk, one Sunday! It might have turned out badly, people could have become indignant, turned their backs upon him. Instead, they had admired him, his popularity had only increased. There was no one to complain except Madame Nuñez.

"Imagine introducing *that* creature beneath your roof!" she had exclaimed.

He could still see her face reddening beneath the layer of powder, as she tried to show how disinterested was her advice. In fact, the chief reason he had kept Alberte was to annoy his sister—at least during the first months. Then he had got used to her.

But Madame Nuñez' annoyance had continued to increase.

"We're not even sure she won't go crazy like her mother."

"You're the one that's going crazy, Odilia," he had said with a shrug.

"Why, not at all. And with the heredity she has. . . ."

"What heredity?"

"How can you not know it? Why, that unfortunate woman, to whom you give an allowance, God knows why, doesn't have a grain of common sense. It's known in the neighbourhood. Even

your employees know. Do you think it's nice to have your name circulating in the Triangle? And as if that weren't enough, you go to the extent of taking into your home that girl who, you can be sure, hasn't the least gratitude, and you tear her away from her mother, who. . . ."

"What's all this about?" he had yelled (but mostly he yelled on principle, for Odilia was naturally so shrewish and venomous that he paid little attention to her words). "My name circulating in the Triangle? I've torn Alberte away from her mother? What in God's name is this crazy story?"

Taking her time and without appearing in any way impressed, Madame Nuñez had sat down. She was a stout matron, overwhelmed with fat like her brother, whom she rather resembled, with a touch of supplementary spite in her bulging black eyes.

"Crazy story it certainly is, my good Klacs." She affected a condescendingly pitying tone calculated to exasperate her brother—this was one of her means of revenge. "You don't know what a hornet's nest you've stuck your nose into! Everyone's laughing about it. Just imagine. . . ."

He had done nothing but shrug. Feeling, all the same, a slight exasperation.

And again the years had passed. From time to time, a pin-prick. It was reported to him that Elsa had exhibited herself on the quays, drunk, in a white dress she pretended was her bridal gown. A dismissed servant had thrown out, in leaving, some words as to "that woman Monsieur van Baarnheim drove insane." Dr. Roger Nuñez, while examining him, repeated a piece of gossip. Oh, he knew what to make of it: Roger and his mother could not stand Alberte and tried to prejudice him against her by recalling her mother to mind. All the same, they had managed gradually to exasperate him thoroughly. For instance, when he had as usual declared, "As for me, I want only happy people around me," he suddenly struck against the disagreeable memory of Elsa and her little face contorted with wrath. He came to wish that she would leave town, and had ended up by deciding that she should do so. She, who had handed over her daughter to him in exchange for

an allowance, would easily consent to change towns for a little more money. This decision would arrange everything.

She would go, and people would forget all about her. For a fortnight he experienced total peace, without even hurrying to put his idea into execution. She would go. What foolishness to get so wrought up over so little! But supposing she did not go?

"This is morbid," he said under his breath, putting his hand over his heart, where there had been a sudden stab of pain. "It's morbid. Come, come," he told himself, trying to quiet his pain as one quiets an animal, with some brief and soothing words. She would go. Alberte would succeed where Philippe had failed. A good girl, Alberte. He rarely addressed a word to her, but her admiring presence was not unpleasant to him. A nuisance to have had to ask that of her. But tranquillity above all things. . . .

He was breathing painfully, there was a slight rumbling in his chest, as if he had a cold. And he would have plunged into this new subject of anxiety, had not Suzanne entered with her quick step, her eyes shining with animation, bringing into the room an air of gaiety and freshness.

"So, this is the way you hurry? I've waited an hour, now! Quick, my medicine."

She came and went in the room, smiling, bouncing like a rubber ball over the tile floor, apparently paying no attention to him.

"How slow you are! Supposing I threw you out, eh?"

"Oh, you'd not do that, sir. You'd have pity on a poor orphan," said Suzanne, comically wrinkling up her little face.

"You think so!" he grumbled. "Come, now, come here. Will you come over here, I tell you!"

She had already approached, and the old man's hands settled on her hips, drawing that indifferent young body towards him.

Chapter Three

IN the language of the Triangle, "the Marys" were the prostitutes who were too poor, too ugly, or too unlucky to find a room and were obliged to ply their trade in no matter what nook or corner, giving themselves to the sailors and working-men—or to farmhands when a Fair brought them to town—behind the stacked crates in the warehouses, in unused boats, or in the dark porches of chapels. Was it by way of derision? Or was it an allusion to the Virgin Mary's laborious quest for a shelter? Perhaps, in this custom of bestowing the sweet name of the Blessed Virgin upon suffering creatures devoid of beauty, it is possible to see a form of the superstitious indulgence accorded simpletons and fools in other lands?

The Marys were already abroad, wandering the narrow streets of the lower town, for the day was ending. There was *Lame Mary*, who lived in a cellar with several little boys who may or may not have been her children and who plied the trade of "rats," another specialty of the Triangle, slipping into ships' holds and plundering them abundantly; there was *Tugboat-Mary* (also provided with a little boy), whose stand was near the sluice-gate and who was the delight of the sailors' leisure moments; and *Dockers' Mary*, who reserved her services for that honourable class of labourers and was not lacking in charm, despite the beginning of a cataract on her right eye—she drank her liquor straight and had a great repertoire of smutty songs which she sang in an agreeable voice; there was *Six-o'clock-Mary*, who picked up her men at the door of the brewery, particularly on Saturday nights; and *Old-Rags-Mary*

who also exercised the old-clothes trade and accepted payment in kind. . . .

All these Marys called out a greeting to Alberte, as she hurried towards the Three Storks tavern, and she replied to them, but without warmth.

Alberte's appearance marked her as the brewer's daughter, for she was tall and handsome and a little massive in build. Her regular features, her dark hair and eyes, her heavy eyelids, her sensual lips showed the same energy which still held together the crumbling features of the old brewer, defying time. Yet this robust and simple girl was troubled and encompassed about with a subtle *malaise* of which she herself was only vaguely aware; you detected it in that too measured stride which she obviously held in check, in that tense set of the jaw, and in those apparently calm eyes that were clouded with anxiety as the quiet pool is tinged by the invisible water weed. The explanation was easy to find: during the six years that had passed since Alberte had gone to live at the brewer's house, she had never ceased keeping a sharp eye on her every gesture, modifying her way of speaking, eating, living, as only a child can do, prompt to feel, as does a shy and sensitive child, the least note of irony and be hurt by it. This continual vigilance had no doubt somewhat sharpened her naturally limited intelligence and blunt (coarse, but not vulgar) judgment; it had also turned this bewildered girl into something slightly deformed and distorted—as everyone became who approached and felt the tyrannical rule of the old man.

As she drew near the Three Storks, Alberte slowed down her steps still more. Behind the long grey building, the sluice-gate boomed and roared like a storm. Beyond it, beneath the dull sky, lay the long, golden plain which the slightly elevated little dykes bordered by willow trees divided up with an apparent and peaceable equity. The young girl stood motionless in the rising wind which penetrated the houses by the open windows, making the checked curtains fly, the glass doors bang, and sending running a maid-servant who was working in the courtyard where freshly washed tablecloths flapped like sails.

With a sigh, Alberte pushed open the heavy oak door. In the

main dining room of the tavern, crouched down like a skinny brown hen in the midst of dirty water, Trina was scrubbing the tile floor with careful slowness. The wooden benches were stacked on the long tables, and a powerful odour of the water she was using rose in waves, battling against the stormy wind.

"Is Mama in, Trina?"

Trina's pointing finger rose towards the ceiling.

"Up there," she said laconically. "But. . ."

"What? Isn't she . . . alone?"

"Oh, you can go up, you'll not disturb her," said Trina with a dry laugh.

Alberte was no longer listening. It was always with a secret uneasiness that she returned to this familiar setting: the big dining room with its great oak beams, the blackened hams hanging from the iron chandelier, the grey-with-dust paper flowers on the bar at the far end of the room. The odour was always the same, too, in this room where she had played as a child, she was well acquainted with those sour fumes of spilt beer, the mustiness that came from the canal-lock and which impregnated the old walls with humidity, the stale pipe-smoke lingering in the corners, the pungent and penetrating smell of the black soap with which, every morning, they lathered the tables grimed by generations of pipe-smokers.

Here she had spent the first fourteen years of her life, more or less attending the local school by day, waiting on table at night, bullied a little by the tavern-keeper, no doubt a little courted by the drink-befuddled customers from her precocious thirteenth year on, but not particularly unhappy. She had been well fed, had been sheltered from the cold. And they had not been mean to her. They were very fond of Elsa, despite her sudden flare-ups, her pretensions, the momentary arrogance that alcohol bestowed upon her. The tavern-keeper, a stout old sly fox with a tradesman's mind, treated her almost with respect: her semi-lunacy, the careless and almost elegant way in which she handed out money, with haughty lavishness on some nights—that money Klaes van Baarnheim sent her—drew customers and made them laugh, a double advantage.

Laughter. Alberte had heard that indulgent laughter which held a note of contempt, the contempt the people of the north have for those who fling away their money instead of deriving profit from it. That laughter had surrounded her from her infancy. Unaware of the cause, it had made her suffer, and her suffering had become transformed into this stubborn silence which was her armour against her mother's displays of foolishness in public. So it was that, when they had announced to her one day that from then on she would go to live with her father, the rich brewer, Klaes van Baarnheim, whose garden could be glimpsed on the other side of the river, she had experienced a great relief. And it was never without displeasure that she returned to see her mother.

Trina, as patient as a seamstress who knows that with each stitch she is composing a garment, continued tirelessly to vent her spleen.

"The poor creature, she's not responsible for what she does, is she? But suppose the old man dies, bang! like that. Will you have a penny? And she'll be on your hands, don't forget that, and you who don't even know how to earn a living! Oh, you have a nice life now, but remember, 'He who begins with the cake will end . . .'"

"I'm going up now," said Alberte.

So saying, she crossed the room and began to climb the spiral staircase, leaving Trina gasping with amazement and rather indignant at being cut short in her patient labour. What! Trina had expected to hear complaints, had been ready to sympathize, to calculate the chances. . . . She should have expected this treatment, however, from Alberte. That girl had always been unbearably uppish. And now that she had pretty dresses she had lost her head, of course, and couldn't bear the sight of Trina, who had known her as a baby. The ingratitude of youth! With a long and painful sigh, the old woman lifted her shoulders in a shrug. Then, her tired old cross-patch face more wrinkled than ever, she again with difficulty bent her rheumatic knees down to the damp floor.

Behind the door of what had once been a hay-loft, could be heard a shrill and rather combative-sounding voice.

"In reality," that voice was saying, with a certain emphasis, "they hold it against me that I'm *well-born*. It's always like that, isn't it? People can't bear to have anyone be better than they are. Well, my name is Elsa Damiaen."

"Like the bank," said another voice, spiritless and indifferent.

"Yes, and that's just what they've done to me," cried the shrill voice, at a peak of excitement. "Just imagine, they try to make me think I don't have the right to my share in the bank because I married the brewer, Klaes van Baarnheim. For I was married. . . ."

Alberte entered the room, and at once there was a great silence. The bedroom was dark. One of the shutters was still closed upon an incredible disorder. In this rather big room lingered the vestiges of a nondescript splendour: the bed that was draped in dusty materials that had perhaps once been rose-coloured; the shabby garments bursting out of the monumental wardrobe; the gramophone set directly on the floor; a very ornate empty birdcage; Japanese fans tacked on the walls. . . . Everywhere, on the sills of the two windows, on the plain wooden chairs, on the cracked table and the chest of drawers adorned with statuettes and decorated in cubistic designs, there was a profusion of little doilys of coarse lace which must at one time have represented the height of luxury to Elsa. But even those doilys were stained and torn, and were strewn with cigarette butts, orange peel, empty glasses. In the middle of the room, seated at a table before a bottle of beer, was a man—a kind of bundle of rags surmounted by a cap—and he was uttering vague mutterings. Standing in front of him was a thin little woman, red cheeked, bright eyed, wearing a kimono which gaped open, revealing her naked bosom.

"Bertha!" she said in amazement, staring at Alberte who had stepped forward. "Why, you never come in the evenings! You. . . ."

Already the feverishly excited voice had become subdued, and a kind of fear could be heard in it.

"Well, as you see, I am here," said Alberte deliberately. Then, turning to the bundle of rags: "I've come to see my mother," she

said, clearly articulating her words. "Will you be so kind as to leave us?"

"What?" grumbled the bundle of rags.

The cap was raised, and Alberte had a glimpse of a formless face, wrinkled like an apple in autumn, where two dull blue eyes slumbered.

"Leave the room, now," she said, laying her hand on the beggar's shoulder.

He staggered to his feet.

"So, they're shutting up shop?" said the spiritless voice. "They're certainly polite in this place! But what about me? I've still got a thirst. And I'd have you know the little lady promised me. . . ."

Firmly, Alberte pushed him towards the door.

"Oh, all right, all right, we're going! We'll leave you two ladies to your privacy," he snickered. "But you might give me a little something, all the same. It's the truth, they keep you listening for hours to a story you can't make head or tail of, and poetry, God almighty, where she got it from you wonder, but you could set them things to music. . . . Let go of me, you! I'll say . . . what I have to say. Let me go, I tell you! Everyone here is loony!"

He was struggling with might and main against leaving the room when Alberte, flushing deeply, slipped something into his hand.

"That's better," he said, pocketing the paper money. "You see, we've got our dignity, Young-lady-whose-name-I-don't-know. All the same, I'll give him a piece of my mind, that one who tipped me off to come here! Four long hours I've been stuck here. . . . All right, all right, I'm going. . . ."

Alberte had shut the door behind the man, who could be heard heavily descending the stairs.

Elsa had sat down, all her excitement gone as if by enchantment. The arrival of her daughter always brought her to her senses. Staring sullenly at the floor, she sat there motionless.

"Well, Mamma?" said Alberte, going over to sit down beside her. But she could not manage to adopt an affectionate tone, she was too irritated at having seen Elsa still raving as usual.

The beggar, too, had laughed, arousing her childish wrath. All

her life, this shame had been in her like a thorn. The flesh having closed over it now, she thought she was cured; but never could she manifest real tenderness for her mother.

Elsa remained mute. Her face, having lost the bright colours that excitement gave it, had become once more flabby and dull; it was the face of an ugly and sulky little girl who has learned nothing from life. The presence of her daughter was disagreeable; in fact, and although she boasted a great deal about the sacrifices she had made for her, she had never liked that clear-seeing look of her daughter, for it snatched her away from the world of phantasies in which she herself only half believed.

"Well, what do you want?" she said in a sullen voice. Mechanically she stretched out a hand for the bottle of beer on the table, and stopped under the look Alberte gave her.

"Why, I came to see you, Mamma," said Alberte with studied sweetness. "And I brought you a surprise."

"What surprise?" said Elsa, still sulking.

"I'll give it to you if you promise. . . ."

"If I promise what?"

"You know quite well. Not to let those beggars come up here any more. You can talk to Trina and Hélène. . . . Now, be nice. Promise me."

She was talking in the exaggeratedly indulgent tone one employs with children. It was only by treating her like a child that Alberte could recover a little affection for her mother. If she could think of her as irresponsible, Elsa could still be loved. But if she had to ascribe the conduct of a rational person to her mother, she could not have understood her and therefore would be unable to pardon her. Thus, although she lavished small acts of kindness upon her—gifts, or even money saved from the allowance her father gave her—Alberte rejected, with unconscious cruelty, every confused attempt Elsa made to confide in her or speak to her without restraint.

"Give me the surprise first," said Elsa.

"You promise not to let beggars come up here any more?"

"And suppose I want to talk to someone, what about that?" said Elsa.

She was still sufficiently drunk to allow herself this feeble defiance.

"You have H  l  ne and Trina, I told you," said Alberte.

"But suppose I don't like H  l  ne and Trina?" Elsa sulkily went on. "You always keep me from doing what I want to do. I can't drink, I can't talk, I can't do a thing. Do you imagine it's any fun? I've had enough misfortunes to. . . ."

Alberte had flushed.

"A lot of people have misfortunes and they don't feel obliged because of that to conduct themselves . . . as you do. I've brought you some money, I'm more than willing to help you, and if Father gives me a dowry, as he promised, I'll help you still more. But if you go on committing so many stupidities that we hear talk of it right in the house, so that Father himself is obliged to speak to me about it, I honestly swear, you'll not see me again."

"Oh!" said Elsa, with a little laugh, "I know you're all too willing to stay down here at the house, as you call it. But you don't dare abandon me completely, eh? You remember the sacrifices I made for you. All the same, you're my daughter, don't forget it!"

"Oh, I don't forget it, you needn't worry," said Alberte with sudden bitterness. "Even if I tried to, I couldn't."

She stopped, as if ashamed of this lament that had slipped out for the first time. A little distraught, she went to the window, opened it, and leaned out over the canal lock, welcoming its coolness on her burning face. She pressed her two hands against her breast, as if to stop the flow of blood from a wound, trying to calm herself and to drive down into the deepest part of her being this fearful secret whose face she did not want to see. How many times had her father, without meaning to, and, more wittingly, her aunt or one of her cousins, reopened this wound? How many efforts had she made in the past six years to banish everything in her that could make her think about what she was: a girl of the Triangle, and the daughter of Elsa. Yet, no matter how hard she tried, could she ever forget this shame always ready to revive and disturb her peace?

Elsa, profiting by this unexpected agitation on the part of a girl so strong, quietly filled her glass of beer, while keeping her eye on Alberte, who continued to lean out of the window. She had only half heard the stifled plaint that had escaped Alberte. That suffering had only confusedly penetrated her poor, befuddled mind; all she understood was that they wanted to deprive her of her audience, the beggars she stuffed with food and sometimes clothed, thus stifling the obscure remorse that had haunted her ever since the day Alberte was born and which, upon ridding herself of the child with the clear-seeing eyes by handing her over to Klaes van Baarnheim, had become still greater, though unformulated, almost unconscious. For a moment they were silent, each one intent upon her own particular hurt, incapable of communing with or understanding the other. The girl, leaning over the foaming black water, gathering her strength, collecting her griefs like weapons; the anxious mother, sensing the lifting of the fog of drunkenness and the return of blunt reason, stretching out a cautious hand towards the bottle of beer. Then Alberte turned round, and for a moment they looked at each other.

"Come now, Mamma, be reasonable," the young girl said more calmly. "All these follies are quite useless. You could live a hundred times better if you wished. What do you get out of all these fabrications, these. . . ." She stopped, incapable of defining that world of chimeras in which Elsa moved and which she never approached without distaste. "Is it hard to drink slightly less? There are other things in life, after all. There's. . . ." She glanced round her. Oh, how could she find arguments in this miserable disorder made worse by the pretentiousness visible in the torn pictures on the wall, and even in the grease-stained Spanish shawl in which Elsa draped herself? "You could make an effort. I've certainly made an effort, myself. And it wasn't always easy, either. What? This isn't a life. . . ."

She shrugged, discouraged at Elsa's stubborn silence. Now and then, when Alberte talked without weighing her words, one could see what she might have been, had not so many constraints lain heavily upon her: a powdered and rouged barmaid with regular

features and a physique that would soon put on weight, a barmaid who, with arms akimbo, would bawl out the customers.

"Follies!" said Elsa, who had caught only this word. "You treat me like a madwoman, now! Never an affectionate word, never a little consideration. . . ."

"Your're not going to start all over again, Mamma. I came here to talk to you seriously. Listen. . . ."

Elsa reached out for the bottle, and this time Alberte did not stop her.

"Father wants you to leave the neighbourhood," she said with some embarrassment. (That conversation with her father had been so painful!). "You say you don't want to leave. He offers so much, you refuse, and you think you'll get somewhere!" (Unconsciously she was using the very words of her father. But she was in such a hurry to get this over!). "That's all quite understandable, but it can't go on forever. I've seen how he conducts his business, you know" (Her voice betrayed admiration). "He insists and insists, and then all at once it's over. He goes on to other things. He's not a man to go on begging for years. If you don't seize this opportunity, he'll let you drop—bang, like that. So for heaven's sake, mind what you're doing. . . ."

A sly little smile flickered on Elsa's faded face.

"It's all the same to me," she said.

"It's not all the same, not at all," said Alberte, controlling her impatience. "What would you do if he didn't give you another penny?"

"I don't need money," said Elsa, raising her head with comical pride displayed on her thin, rouged face. "As for me, I work! Well-born as I am, I work to provide food for my child, for. . . ."

"Mamma!"

Elsa stopped short, caught red-handed, took a swallow of beer, stared sulkily at the floor.

"Listen. You will leave the neighbourhood, you will go to the country, to the seaside, or wherever you like. No work, life in a hotel—that would be nice, wouldn't it? And when I have my dowry, you'll be able to do whatever you like, come back here if

you want to, they'll not bother you any more, I promise you. I'll be twenty-one in a month. That makes four years to wait. Four years, and then you can do whatever you like, everything you like!"

Elsa remained silent.

"Well now," said Alberte impatiently, "you surely don't think Father will offer you more than that? He's no fool, you know!"

"I don't want to go away. I don't want any money."

The stubbornness depicted on her mother's face—along with a trace of malice, even—exasperated Alberte. Were her mother to leave the Triangle, it would indeed relieve her of a great weight. But chiefly she was afraid that her father would hold her responsible for the failure of this errand.

"All the same, it wouldn't be the first time you took his money," she said ruthlessly. "You accept the allowance, don't you? Haven't you always taken his money?"

For a moment Elsa remained motionless, then her face flushed bright red, like the face of a child caught doing something wrong. Taken money? Her bewildered mind fled from the idea, trying to take cover in the dark burrow of her chimeras.

Yes, she needed money, to buy at outrageous cost the rags in which she dressed; she needed money to hand out to the swarms of children in the streets; she needed money to be surrounded, tolerated, and *believed* by people so that her pathetic baggage of romantic nonsense could be infused with life.

What a long road she had travelled since the first lie! That day when she had wanted to escape the ridicule and the humiliation of being abandoned, in despair at being nobody, really, but the heroine of a quite ordinary affair with a man. . . . She had begun with, "No, I'm not the sort of person you think I am! My family was rich. This is how it happened. . . ." With the grotesque accessories of a carnival, which she had picked up from women's magazines—castles, elopements, a flight in the rain—how easily she had managed to forget the banal and humiliating truth! As in drunkenness or in sleep, how she had sunk deeper and deeper into her phantasy. And always more money was needed to keep up

the lie and to forget the money she had begged. And always she sank in deeper.

Yet there had once been a truth. Oh, a very small and humble truth, well suppressed: Elsa's love had not been of first-rate quality. But in the midst of so much vanity (was she not a heroine?), of such a lot of silliness (she thought she had captivated her lover), of cupidity (she enjoyed her good fortune without even dreaming of turning it to account and had the affair lasted three months longer she would have been snubbing old acquaintances), had there not been, one day, a tiny flame of tenderness? Had there not been a flicker of that unexpected maternal feeling that the weakest woman has for the strongest man if he is sleeping at her side? Had there not been, for one little moment, that vow taken in silence and believed accepted, that ephemeral honour, that gift, that pride crowning the humblest and stupidest of women at being chosen, from the rest of the world, to be the queen of one man's solitude?

She had forgotten that hour of the night when she had ceased to be Elsa, that talkative, vain, and foolish girl, and had become just another woman, pregnant with sadness, lying beside her sleeping lover. She had forgotten that hour of the morning when, after he had left her, she had lain motionless, growing cold like an object from which the hand has been withdrawn. She had forgotten that singular peace, that innocence, that emptiness of thought that are yielded by servitude or the act of giving. . . .

She had forgotten that moment when she had given something, when she had had something to give. All that was left to her was this jungle of lies in which she was more and more losing herself, a jungle from which only her daughter still succeeded in drawing her for a while, exposing her to the light with an innocent cruelty. "Haven't you always taken that money?"

"Can't you leave me alone?" she screamed, all of a sudden. "Leave me alone! Get out of here! Aren't you ashamed to torture your own mother like this? What have I done to you? What have I done to them all?"

And she collapsed, sobbing, her head on the table.

Alberte waited a moment, her face contorted with impatience. But as the sobbing died down and the breathing became more regular, she silently stood up and, without casting a glance behind her, left the room. She knew by experience that nothing more could be got out of her mother for several hours.

Silently she crossed the beer-hall, without deigning to look at Trina, who scrubbed away furiously. And she heaved a sigh of relief as she closed the heavy door behind her.

Chapter Four

THE wan sunlight that followed the storm did not penetrate the narrow thoroughfare of the Rue Magus where already the little shops of the jewellers and money-changers were beginning to light up. It was six o'clock, and the street was slowly filling with a flood of stockbrokers coming out of the Diamond Market, a respectable old edifice black with soot and grime.

Philippe did not hurry, but took his time, for he was fond of rubbing elbows with this crowd of grave, long-bearded old Jews clothed entirely in black and having a rabbinical look in their high crowned hats and long frock coats, not to mention those young Jews of the new persuasion in light grey suits and with enormous pearl tie-pins who displayed the exaggerated self-assurance of stockbrokers; and those fat Dutch traders who, forgetting that they would not have condescended to speak to this rabble anywhere else, were slapping with cordiality the backs of the terribly elegant and sleek-haired Greeks, the pale, shabby little French brokers carrying dubious-looking torn leather brief-cases, the stocky Syrians with arrogant yellowish faces, greasy and glistening. The narrow street was now swarming with people lingering to discuss business matters or take notes on the exchange. A hostile familiarity united these disparate men who, before returning to the bosom of their families, were still talking in low voices about money, unable to tear themselves away from the thrilling game that made them accomplices. Philippe knew them well, those faces imbued with their own importance, those quick glancing and agitated eyes.

those podgy hands fondling the greasy paper money or furtively trying to sell a flawed gem or a diamond cursed with a carbon spark. He was fond of this surging and uneasy atmosphere, the feverish excitement that he felt beneath the pompous attitudes, majestic paunches, horn-rimmed spectacles. He felt at ease, warmed momentarily by the vice or the passion of others. Even the sensation of having lost, and of having lost a rather respectable sum on the market, could not really excite him. He would cover his losses somehow with Klaes van Baarnheim. For some time, now, the old fellow had rather lost interest in the brewery, being caught up in a frenzy for novelty, selling his properties, feverishly buying additional stocks. Not to mention his charitable works which were multiplying, along with expenditures of every kind. It was as though he wanted to test the bounds of his power, to extend his impatient hand over the town, upsetting commerce, putting bankers on the alert, welcoming a horde of beggars, talking about giving his workmen a football field near the factory, and buying, buying. . . .

"After all," Philippe reflected, "it's as good a way as any of enjoying life. If only I could really manage to be fond of money, I wouldn't be so bored. It must be amusing to a narrow and calculating mind. They have eyes and cannot see their happiness. . . ."

Perhaps, though, they did not know how to take advantage of it. He thought of Alberte. She, too, had a zest for life, he was sure of it. You had only to see her bite into an apple, run her hand over a piece of furniture, as he had seen her do, smell flowers in an almost voluptuous way, to feel the sensuality that radiated from her. And for all that, she dressed herself like a music teacher, was so self-restrained that she appeared ridiculously stiff to strangers, and he had caught her more than once with knitted brows trying to read—in vain, he could have sworn—the bound books in Klaes' library. And why did she put herself to so much trouble? Klaes appreciated her none the more for it. No doubt, a kind of pride. Yes, she must have a kind of pride, for how many times, under the rough teasing of the brewer, had he seen her turn away, hiding her

face, but flinching and quivering as a flogged horse quivers.

For a time, he had expected her to exploit the Elsa affair, turn the old man's irritation to some advantage. But Alberte was not clever—in a way, that was what made her so desirable. The idea of grabbing the fortune by persuading Klaes to acknowledge her legally as his daughter had evidently not crossed her mind. And yet, with a little coaching, what good use she could make of that fortune! He would have liked to see her, with all her ridiculous qualms over respectability dispelled, getting her teeth into everything that money could buy. He would have liked to teach her not to be ashamed of herself, of her splendid animal self. . . . But now he could rather imagine her, after the death of her father, leaving the house, incapable of being satisfied with her small dowry—she would have acquired a taste for the easy life of the van Baarnheims—uncertain of the future, and he could imagine himself going to her, offering his protection. . . . She would prefer that to returning to the Triangle, he was sure of it, although she visibly detested him. And why did she detest him? Certainly because she knew he had seen through her, was not taken in by her calm and collected attitude. She must enjoy giving herself good reasons for enduring her father's tyranny, accounting for it by her love of order and virtue—whereas what she especially appreciated was her semi-idleness. . . . He would hold her in his arms. And she would cry, perhaps? Philippe laughed to himself.

"What rapture! And so banal! 'I loved even the tears I made her shed.' And it would amuse me for a week—no, let's be generous, a fortnight. She's a young girl. . . ."

Roger Nuñez had considered it wise to leave Alberte in ignorance of the seriousness of Klaes' condition, along with the old gentleman himself. In a few months, sometime that winter, Klaes van Baarnheim would be dead, without having suspected a thing, and Alberte would be evicted. Everything was for the best in the best of possible middle-class worlds. It would not have been moral for that illegitimate daughter, that tavern-waitress, to inherit such a fortune. And yet she would certainly have put it to better use than Aunt Odilia or Cousin Roger would, not to mention himself,

Philippe. Besides, that was what was immoral about it. Fortunes should pass only to those who don't know how to benefit by them; it was the rule.

Suddenly he felt rather lonely, rather uneasy. He looked about him and saw that the crowd had now dispersed. Only the Jews who lived in the quarter still remained in little groups or were going down the three steps of the Kosher restaurants where the windows displayed, like glistening pearls, green and translucent cucumbers, rosy pink salmon, loaves of bread with oiled crusts. Where should he go now? He hesitated. To the port? To the *Petit Matelot* café, where the sturdy girls in short skirts let their pale thighs be seen in the glare of naked light-bulbs? To the "Thirteen Marvels" where the girls were dwarfs, frigid little girls, neglected beauties, disfigured with hideous permanents, but fussily eager to please, grotesquely lewd? To the *Manège*, the most clandestine dive in the Triangle, where naked women eternally rode round and round on worn-out old horses, in a kind of circus, making their unlovely flesh quiver for the delectation of dozens of hidden spectators peering at them from behind the latticed windows of the little booths? The port had inexhaustible riches of the kind to offer, but nothing tempted him, really. It would be still better to pay a visit to his mistress, Clara. This was the hour when she returned from that Beauty Institute which was her place of combat, refreshed, smoothed by docile hands—and he liked to imagine those hardworking hands kneading with angry disgust all the old pleasure-mad bodies—her nails polished, her eyelids painted, her skin miraculously white, edible, perfumed, with nothing about her to show the imminent collapse except that glimmer in the depths of her eyes, that breach in the fortress, that wound it pleased him to widen, watching it bleed. . . . Come, he admonished himself, it's the hour.

And he set off afoot across the streets which were lighting up, choosing the busiest ones, sniffing the air in search of a new desire, no matter what, a new emotion or even less, a tremor, a ripple on the water. . . . But he found nothing. The streets, that night, were full of placid people going home from work or going forth in

stupetied couples, like oxen to the slaughter, towards some cinema bleeding with neon lights.

Feeling depressed, he slowly, almost resignedly, climbed the stairs to the luxurious apartment where Clara was awaiting her daily torture.

Chapter Five

"THE master's in a hopping bad temper today," said Suzanne breezily, coming into the kitchen and shutting the door behind her.

They were all sitting round the big marble-topped table: Castereau, the thin and liverish gardener; Jean, the tall chauffeur with shaven head and a pompous air of distinction; Gudule, the fat, sad-faced cook, slow-moving, with bovine eyes; and the book-keeper, old Maalens. Only Mademoiselle Paulc, her big head hunched between her bony shoulders, remained standing up to drink her coffee, as if to indicate the difference in rank between her and the rest of the staff.

"It's not for you," she cried shrilly, "to criticize Monsieur van Baarnheim, but I'll admit he is hard to get on with, these last few days."

"If you'd heard him at breakfast!" said Suzanne, perching on the edge of the table. "Ow! He certainly lit into them! At the end of it, Master Roger had to give him a shot of sedative. . . ."

Maalens looked at her uneasily. "Did he mention me?" he asked.

Suzanne leaned towards him with a laugh.

"Mention you, Fred? Yes, along with the rest of us, that's all. To hear him, we're all good-for-nothings, blood-suckers, 'ingrates,' and. . . . Oh, I heard it all!"

"And the ones upstairs?" asked Castereau, his yellow face wrinkled with spite.

"Ow! Worse than anything! He told Madame Odilia he was

through with fattening her up like a goose just to do nothing. He said when you fattened up geese you at least had their livers afterwards."

They all laughed except Mademoiselle Paule, who limited herself to remarking, "If there's one thing Monsieur van Baarnheim lacks, it's certainly tact."

"God help me," muttered the book-keeper, stammering with nerves. "To th-think I've g-got to sp-speak to him about the München affair this afternoon!"

He was a paunchy little man in his forties, with frizzed, greasy hair, his eyes perpetually watering with fear or sympathy.

Jean, the chauffeur, a malicious gleam in his cold eyes, slapped the little man on the back.

"Come on, Fred, have a drop of brandy? That'll settle your nerves."

"B-but it's . . . you see, it's. . . ." The unhappy book-keeper muttered weakly.

"What harm can it do you?" urged the chauffeur, giving Suzanne a sly wink.

"Why yes, Fred," said she, "that'll untie your tongue. Stuttering's like hiccups, and there's nothing like brandy to cure it."

Maalens continued to hold out, divided between the fear of offending Jean and Suzanne—he was not used to so much sympathy—and his secret (so he thought) weakness for alcohol, as well as the terror Klaes inspired, for Klaes liked to accuse him of drinking his liquor and smoking his cigars on the sly. But as Suzanne put the half-filled glass under his nose, he held out no longer and eagerly drank it down.

"You'll need it," Castercau bantered. "You should have heard him this morning laying into me about the kitchen garden! Now I ask you, what's he doing, poking round in my garden?"

"And yesterday," groaned Jean, "I happened to be reading a magazine in the car. You know what he did? He grabbed it out of my hands and pitched it into the canal! 'I'll not tolerate,' he said, 'having people see my chauffeur in my car reading such trash!' I'm telling you, that's what he said. And last night he was talking to

me about the culture of the working classes and he gave me a book on whaling. Can you beat it? Whaling!"

"What magazine was it you were reading?" asked Suzanne, highly amused.

"*Heart to Heart*, said the chauffeur, giving her a languishing look. "Why?"

"*Heart to Heart*!" Suzanne screamed with laughter. "You read that sentimental stuff?"

"Why shouldn't I read it? What's wrong with being sentimental? You're siding with him, now?"

"Not everyone can be like you, Suzanne," said Mademoiselle Paule, taking sides unexpectedly. "Not everyone can make a life for themselves and keep a heart as hard as yours is."

"Not everyone can, you said it," said Suzanne, with a meaningful stare at the stenographer's thick ankles. "Even when some would like to, and have a try. But nothing doing! And take it from me, you needn't be jealous. Good Lord, my life's no joke," she added kindly, seeing the hurt look on the old maid's face. "Specially not these days!"

"Oh, what wouldn't we give to see that famous last will and testament!" groaned Jean. "But I'd not be surprised if he isn't making a few changes again. He's been to see the old goat of a notary."

Mademoiselle Paule let out a little scream.

"Oh! What about the little settlement he promised me. . . ."

"I'm sure Morsieur van Baarnheim will leave us all something," murmured Maalens. "He's so good. . . ."

This made Castereau explode. Although he allowed Suzanne, without protest, to bestow certain favours on the old master, and hoped to retire with her when she had accumulated her dowry, he hated nonetheless to have the old brewer's generosity vaunted in front of him.

"So good, so good!" he scoffed. "If I had the money he has, I'd be good, too, I'd be Monsieur Castereau as big as life and so good, so good—and none the better for it."

"Yes, but you're not, that's the trouble," laughed Suzanne, who

considered her betrothed ridiculous when he got himself into a rage.

"And I'd not like to make money the way he made his! Even his father on his deathbed refused to have anything to do with him! That proves it."

"Sheer gossip," said Mademoiselle Paule, almost in spite of herself. She could never really decide whether she loved or hated the brewer, and spent most of her spare time wondering about this. "You're dying of envy, that's all."

"Yes," agreed Suzanne, who had come to glory in her modest functions, "no one's crazy about him, that's sure. But you, my hearty, you'll burst a gut one of these days. For God's sake, you take what he gives you, his shirts, old suits, and tips, don't you? So what are you complaining about? Wait till he dies and till then shut up, like the rest of us!"

"Heavenly saints!" moaned Gudule. "Always this quarrelling! What if they heard you? And what if they sent me packing on account of it? I'm not saying anything, but I was promised something too, you know."

Nothing could stop Castereau when he got started on this subject.

"Shut up? You tell me to shut up? You think you're the boss here, now, you think he'll marry you, maybe? He'll make a will in your favour, eh? Forget it, my girl! The money's there for you to smell, but it'll fill somebody else's stomach! The people upstairs, there are enough of them, will gobble it down and there'll be nothing left for us but the bones. Yes, his shirts fit me, but he'll not be here to wear shirts much longer, and I know what I'm saying!"

There was a shocked silence. No one understood.

"You really think that?" said Mademoiselle Paule in a whisper.

"I sure do," said Castereau with satisfaction. "It'll be over by Spring. And all our monkey-shines, too. We'll have our pension and our little gifts—and we'll be free. Free of the old man, rid of him, my little Suzanne, free to read *Heart to Heart*, my dear Jean, free to sleep on our typewriter, Mademoiselle Paule, and to drink a whole bottle of brandy, Fred. What do you say to that, chums?"

"But how . . . ?" Mademoiselle Paule murmured interrogatively.

"I heard Master Roger and Master Philippe talking about it yesterday. They were standing at the garden gate, arguing, and I was working in my flower beds deaf to the world. Well now, what do you say to the news? Don't you owe me a couple of rounds?"

"Oh sure, sure," muttered Jean grumpily.

He was ~~thinking~~ of the hard time he would have to find a job.

There was that little brush with the police in his past, the old brewer had shut his eyes to it. . . . Sure, the old man would leave him something, enough to retire on, maybe. But then he'd have to look around, invest the money, make decisions. And he was fond of the atmosphere of the van Baarnheim house, liked the big old fashioned limousine with its pearly grey upholstery and the vases for flowers; his room was comfortable, his pay was more than enough, and he could slip away unnoticed to the nearby port.

"You're exaggerating, Castereau," said Mademoiselle Paulc.

She had felt a sudden pang at the idea of not getting up any more at six o'clock and grumblingly making the trip in by bus from the suburbs to get the usual rebuffs and take her share of the thanks that poured in, for she was the one who dealt with the brewer's poor "protégés," favouring some, repulsing others, posing as a Lady Bountiful. After the brewer's death she would no longer have occasion to say, "No, I don't believe he can do anything for you," and she would no longer hear his thundering voice insulting her at every turn—while she took it out on the first person to come near—she would no longer hear the paupers' tales of woe, about how they had just left the hospital and were burdened with an incredible number of children, all of them still mere infants. . . . Alone, with her pension, alone in her spinsterish bedroom, would she be really better off?

Suzanne was deep in thought. So, the moment had come that she had hoped for during every clumsy embrace and every exaggerated demand of the old brewer? "I want nothing but cheerful faces around me!" How many times had she been secretly infuriated at this demand of a spoiled child? "And suppose I don't feel like being cheerful?"—how often she had wanted to reply. But she had grown accustomed to this carefree existence. Now and

then, too, there were presents, a dress or a piece of cheap jewellery, and there were the special privileges. If she had a sudden notion to go to the cinema or eat up the remains of the cake served at luncheon, the old brewer cared almost not at all. Castereau would be harder on her when they married. As for him, the old brewer's embraces didn't count, they were paid for by the money she brought him each time, the money they were hoarding in a tin box. But she'd have to do without Philippe's pettings and pinchings in the corridors, the stolen kisses of the milkman—these were luxuries Suzanne would have to give up. She would be in charge of the cash register at the little café she and Castereau were planning to have. And they would have children—at least Castereau wanted them. He loved her. But suddenly she wondered if she wanted to be loved, if she wanted anything except to be gay and irresponsible.

"And to think he'd promised to give me a gold compact for Christmas," she said, feeling like crying as she thought of the brewer.

Maalens also had tears in his eyes and made no effort to hide them. Yet he had never been as unhappy in any other place. He could have filled an honourable post in a bank and got drunk every Saturday like a respectable citizen, instead of working without respite, getting himself insulted over every drop he drank, every single pilfered cigar. But he was afraid of everything "outside." From his childhood he had imagined the police discovering proofs of all kinds of crimes in his rooms, of hospital guards pretending he was an escaped lunatic, of his colleagues slandering him, of suspicious company directors, of women making fun of him. And from hearing Klaes (who in private treated him badly) declare in public, "This is my book-keeper, Maalens, the most honest man in the world, he worships me," he had ended up by believing it.

"Say, this is going too far," muttered Castereau. "They all look like mourners at a funeral, now. They worship him, don't they? They. . . ."

He stopped short, put out of countenance by the silence, and all his own jubilation evaporated. He, too, had felt a shock which was not entirely of pleasure, at hearing in that unexpected way of

the brewer's approaching death. He knew that he and Suzanne figured largely in the will. He would have the amount needed to buy the little café of his dreams. But suddenly he was emptied of his venom, unburdened of his hatred—for how could you seriously hate a man who had only a few months to live?—and felt strangely at loose ends, his own projects seeming to lose all interest.

In the silence, the door of the hall opened and the shrill voice of Madame Nuñez was heard, barking out an order.

“Suzanne, that makes three times that I’ve rung for you! Bring the coffee!”

Chapter Six

“WELL!” said Klaes van Baarnheim, settling comfortably in his armchair, “I’m very glad to know that the old carcass is still sound. That shot did me good.”

“You have no reason to worry, Uncle,” said Roger Nuñez, in a quiet little self-important way. “Evidently, those pains, those wakeful nights and those difficult suffocating spells, may seem a bit strange to the layman, but we physicians know to what length trifling neuroses can go. It’s the ransom you’re paying for a full life, if I may say so.”

Short and stocky, he took after his mother and uncle as to his noticeably short legs surmounted by a powerful torso and broad shoulders. Thanks to his thick eyebrows, his large expressionless face, his gloomy dark eyes, his clipped voice, he had managed to compose the curt and ruthless attitude that he believed was the apanage of great physicians. But his mother regarded him with contempt and was not taken in, knowing to what extent he lived in fear of his in-laws—had his wife’s family not provided the money needed to set up his medical practice?—and the opinion of his club, which was the most fashionable in town, and of the Academy of Medicine, and of what such and such a one thought of him in the salon of So-and-So, and the least taboo in vigour in the town of A. In fact, he feared her, too. She had only to raise her voice for him to become quiet and submissive. And when you saw the furtive glances he threw her, or indeed the way he looked furtively around when she spoke, you could not think of him, despite his stocky figure and thick eyebrows, except under the

aspect of one of those overfed and mean-looking dogs pampered by concierges and which, at the least threat, run away, yelping piteously, their tails between their legs.

By comparison with her son, and despite her body deformed by obesity, Madame Nuñez was almost majestic. She entirely filled the armchair in which she had sat down, and it was a marvel that her tiny feet, encased in black satin, could uphold that bulky and shapeless form, all width, in which it was impossible to see a trace of the woman she must once have been. Yet when you examined closely that shocking figure which resembled a spiteful lunatic's caricature, you were surprised to note that the head surmounting it was not without nobility and must at one time have been beautiful. This, despite the chin that now overflowed in flabby waves, losing itself in the ghastly whiteness of the bosom, and despite the puffy eyelids; if you traced an imaginary oval in that swollen face and substituted for that oily pallor a more romantic pallor, you would suddenly be amazed to see, superimposed on the face of the middle-aged lady, the almost intact face of a young and passionate girl with a proud nose and vivacious eyes. As if conscious of this last flicker of beauty, Madame Nuñez held her head high, in spite of the weight of the chin, the breasts, the whole body which pulled her forward. She managed it not without a visible effort which made her look as if, on the point of drowning, she was desperately keeping her head out of water to inhale one last lungful of air.

Madame Nuñez' body had disappeared, was dead to her. You could see, by the way she slacked down in the chair, that she had surrendered it, not without a struggle, to ugliness. But she still defended her face; her snapping black eyes still flashed, there was a trace of powder on the cheeks which had only begun to sag, the thick and still dark hair was arranged with visible care in an elaborate coil. Her shrill, cuttingly imperious voice had also been worked on, like the coiled hair, and made supple and mannered by these years of semi-servitude at her brother's side. In its natural state, that voice would have been none too agreeable, but its added tones of bitter-sweet unction and amiability prevented you from having the least compassion for Madame Nuñez; she was repulsive.

"How glad I am," that voice was saying, "that dear Klaes has been slightly exaggerating things. When it comes to illness, men are such cry-babies, but I had begun to take him seriously; after all, he's past seventy now, and anything might happen suddenly. . . ."

"I was getting upset, too," said Simone. "And you see, Uncle, I came running!"

"I did my best to convince Simone that it was nothing serious," said Philippe, exchanging an understanding glance with his wife, "but she was determined to come."

"She put herself out for nothing," said the brewer with satisfaction. "Ha, ha, you'll still have to wait a while for old Klaes to die! Where's Erna?"

Only a minute ago he had been scornful of Simone's presence; now that he was reassured, he could have wished to see his entire family gathered round him—they owed him that, at least.

"Erna stayed home with the children," Roger hastened to explain. "You know how she is. And it's Rikki's birthday. . . ."

"Birthday, birthday," grumbled Klaes. "All she had to do was bring the boy with her. I'd have given him a nice present. I like to see everyone around me happy!"

"Oh, Uncle! You're too kind," said Roger, hoping the gift might be forthcoming despite Rikki's absence.

"Well, too bad, it'll have to wait another year," sighed Klaes, not without malice.

Roger bit his lips.

"Why, of course, Roger," said Madame Nuñez, entering the lists and speaking to her son with unaccustomed gentleness. "Your Uncle will think of Rikki next year. This year, heaven knows, he has enough troubles. Ah, well, we are not always repaid in this world for the good we try to do. . . ."

This delicate allusion to Elsa was perfectly understood by Klaes, and struck him as disagreeably as Madame Nuñez had hoped it would. His reaction was immediate.

"What's that, Odilia? What's that you're trying to say? On the contrary, I've always been repaid for what I've done. . . . And I mean to prove it soon, on the occasion of a certain birthday."

They all exchanged surprised glances.

"You didn't know? Why, Alberte's, naturally. Yes, yes, she comes of age in a few weeks from now. And I'm going to give her something nice. Do you hear me, Alberte, over there?"

"Yes, Father," she said, flushing. "You are very kind, Father. It's not necessary. . . ."

"Now, now, don't make such a fuss," he broke in, not unkindly. "Come, give me a kiss."

She crossed the room, stiff and self-conscious in the dress that had been studiously ill-chosen for her by Madame Nuñez. Philippe reflected that she was not really beautiful except in the open air, with her throat exposed, her arms bare, her hair dishevelled, her skin hot and sweating, as she had been that day when he had seen her returning from market, carrying a basket overflowing with fish that she had taken the pains to select herself. But when she tried to look distinguished, as he had seen her at luncheon, with her little finger uplifted, wielding her knife and fork like precious instruments, dropping an occasional remark into the conversation with touching ineptitude, she was almost ugly.

With all eyes upon them, father and daughter embraced.

Suzanne had brought in the coffee. Klaes took a cigar.

"Well now, Philippe, what about our plan of association with München? It looks interesting, eh?"

"Yes, Uncle. Maalens will show you the accounts this afternoon, and I must say, the figures are quite encouraging."

"Quite so. Anyway, this merger must go through, no matter what the figures. They've mismanaged their business. What's needed, I tell you, is to give the public the idea of two firms competing. They want to be able to choose—yes, that's what people want, to make a choice. Quality, that means nothing to them, they don't give two pence for quality, if you ask me. I've been thinking up an advertising campaign, you'll give me your opinion, Philippe, based on. . . ."

A lot of good his opinion would do, Klaes wouldn't even listen to him. What Klaes wanted was to talk to a willing audience, to

intoxicate himself with words and dazzle everyone with his grandiose ideas. Then it was up to Philippe to take the pains of assembling those scattered ideas and put them into execution. All the same, what an effect those shots had! Klaes, who had been a morose old man at the luncheon table, seemed to have recovered all his energy, his eyes were sparkling feverishly, he was talking with ease. "I was like that at fifteen," reflected Philippe, "a glass of wine made me believe in God. But now, the trick won't work. And even with whisky. . . ." He was no longer listening. But Alberte, leaning on the old man's chair, was listening, and it was now for her that he was talking. Philippe privately rejoiced. "Didn't I say?" he told himself, "She loves money! Just look at her now—she's devouring Klaes with her eyes!"

Yes, Alberte was devouring her father with her eyes, sincerely full of admiration. She had always admired him: for having restored this decrepit old house, for knowing how to manage people, for having made so much money, and also, but more than anything, for having been what he was, decisive, imperious, and utterly without complications. Was she unaware that her silent and oafish admiration was for Klaes van Baarnheim a tribute he preferred to the clever flatteries of his sister and nephews? In any case, if she did know it, she knew it only through that obscure intuition which arms the stupidest girls against aged and vulnerable men.

"Come now," he said, patting her cheek with an affection he used sparingly, "you see, my girl, your father's still full of beans! Now, my dears, I don't need you any more. Roger has put me to rights and I'm going to take a turn in the mill. Alberte, will you tell Jean to get out the car?"

No sooner had the door closed behind Alberte than Madame Nuñez, unable to contain herself longer, began to pour out her venom.

"Frankly, Klaes, although I don't want to oppose you in any way, you're wrong to give that girl ideas. A birthday party for her! You'll end up by turning her head. Imagine, if something happened to you, what would become of her? Of course, we would do our

duty, we would do what we could for her, but she has no profession, no culture, no education. . . .”

“She’ll not need any,” said the brewer, with his dangerous gaiety. “You’re worried, Odilia? That’s really nice of you! But you’ll not need to do anything for her. I’ve decided to augment her dowry. On her birthday we’ll go to the bank and I’ll deposit a sum in her account. I’m going to surprise her, and you, too. Who knows? Perhaps she’ll be the one to look after you?”

He was still laughing, delighted over his joke and its effect, for Madame Nuñez’ face had grown quite pale when Suzanne came to announce that the car was waiting.

“Your arm, Philippe.”

When Klaes had gone, Madame Nuñez turned upon her son furiously. “Well, Roger,” she said, “if it’s for *this* you give him those shots!”

Chapter Seven

“NOT too fast, Jean. It’s a sunny day—let’s enjoy it.” The car slowly rolled along the quays, beside the motionless canals, the rows of white houses, solidly set, like cubes ranged in a box. Here and there new restaurants displayed their neon lights, nickelled bars, factitious-looking cold cuts. You had to follow the little streets to find the ancient atmosphere of the town, the houses of unequal height with pointed roofs, the cafés below street-level, three steps leading down to their dark coolness.

“The town is bringing itself up to date,” the old financier noted with satisfaction. “When I was young. . . .”

When he was young there had been none of these new buildings of concrete that were blinding in the sunlight, nor any of these wide avenues of immense cafés with transparent doors. Fifty years, which had seemed so brief to him, had transformed everything, even to the stones.

“That is certainly true, sir,” Klaes suddenly heard with astonishment. It was Jean, replying to him. That meant he had been thinking aloud.

“What’s certainly true?”

“The picturesque is vanishing, as you remarked, sir. And it’s a shame.”

“What does that mean, it’s a shame!” muttered the old brewer. Only God knew why this untoward remark of Jean’s irritated him. Things had to change.

“All this foolish agitation, sir!” said Jean in a tone meant to

impress. He had not noticed the coldness in van Baarnheim's voice.

The car had come to a stop at the foot of a bridge.

"A friend was saying to me just the other night, 'All this activity is quite useless,'" Jean went on, "'when it's still possible to live in the country and contemplate nature!' Would you like, sir. . . ."

"For God's sake, Jean," exclaimed Klaes, "do you imagine I need to take lessons from you? 'A friend was saying to me. . . . A friend was saying to me!' I wouldn't let your friends polish my floors, get that into your head once for all! And if you'd never done anything but contemplate nature, as you say, you'd not have had the troubles you've had. Six months in prison—why? For having contemplated nature, Your Honour the Judge. I know all about your Nature! You pay two hundred francs for it, down at the port, but for three hundred francs I'd not have any of it!"

By degrees, his voice had risen to sheer exasperation, but an unforeseen breathlessness stopped him. He quietened down, pressing his left shoulder, where the pain had reappeared. The drawbridge was down again. A little red in the face, Jean speeded up the car.

"The idiot!" said Klaes to himself. "He ran across that in *Heart to Heart*, and in capital letters, no doubt. Bunkum! A juvenile delinquent that I took into my home, out of pure generosity, and now he dares to spout wisdom!"

The pain persisted. "Avoid if possible fits of temper," Roger had said with a smile. But come to think of it, why this fit of temper? He had known for a long time that Jean was a fool. What, then, had so irritated him in this fool's lucubrations? He must forget it.

"Jean?"

"Sir?" (Naturally he affected a huffy tone, now, the jackass!).

"Don't be an idiot. I'll give you a month's leave in September to go to contemplate Nature."

"Thank you, sir."

His manner was still icy. Quickly, this uneasiness must be dispelled, the incident forgotten along with that reasonless anger.

"You may even take a little more time off, if you find someone

to replace you. What the devil! I'm aware that people need holidays!"

"And to be treated with dignity, sir."

"And what's your dignity worth, say?"

Jean realized that the boss's irritation was returning. It was time to yield.

"If, sir, you would be so kind as to give me a month and a half, I know a very decent young fellow who'd give satisfaction. In a month and a half I'd have time to visit my mother, sir, who's gone to live in Italy. . . ."

"It's a deal. You can take a month and a half."

"You're too kind, sir! My mother. . . ."

"All right. all right. You're thinking so much about your old mother that you're going to run someone down, idiot!"

The incident was closed. For a moment he felt relief. Then his wrath flooded up again, hard to swallow. But why in the world had he paid such attention to the stupid words? Why had he thought aloud? Mentally, he tried to retrace this excursion into town from the beginning. The weather was fine, and they were approaching the Flower Market where the little boats moored to the docks were piled with tulips. . . .

Those words! "The picturesque is vanishing. . . . Vain activity. . . . Possible to live in the country. . . . Dignity. . . ." Impossible to forget that affected voice of Jean. Klaes would have to live over again the entire conversation, word by word, until that moment when he had exploded with wrath, a wrath that came from so far away, so far in the dim past. . . .

His mother, that white face with the rounded forehead of a Madonna, was setting off, black-hatted, for Mass.

"Klaes! Odilia! Gertrude! Are you coming?"

They were going to the Church of Saint-Jacques, the most fashionable church in town, to maintain their social rank, for the van Baarnheim family had been—still was, according to their father—one of the most important families in town. But they went on foot.

"Me, when I grow up, I'll ride in a carriage," said little Klaes.

It humiliated him to see the horses pass close by, spattering him with mud, forcing them all to walk single file, hugging the walls in the narrow streets.

"Do you think they'll look at your carriage in Heaven?" his mother had coldly replied. "All these vanities will be punished, Klaes! Believe me, not a quarter of the people who go to Saint-Jacques will go to Heaven!"

"Then why don't we go to the church in the Triangle?"

"The people who live in the Triangle are riff-raff. Ill-bred. Badly dressed. We don't mingle with those people," had been the dry answer.

"But we don't have nice clothes, either," the little voice persisted.

"In any case, we are van Baarnheims."

"So we won't go to Heaven, and we don't even have a carriage?"

The white Madonna face clouded with wrath, the swift slap descended, and the little girls had laughed, especially Odilia. Subdued and sulky, Gertrude already gave promise of growing up to be the dull young girl who one day married a broker, a young man chosen by her parents, and who was destined to die in childbirth, almost passively, leaving behind her a little son, Philippe.

And then it was evening, in the empty dining room of the big house. The mother was going back and forth between the kitchen and the dimly lit room, sighing from time to time with weariness.

"Mamma! Why are you sighing?"

"Because I'm tired, my child."

"Why don't you have a maid to help you, like the Sarfatis?"

"Because we are not rich enough, Klaes."

It was the father who had spoken, in the slightly pompous tone he affected.

"Then we're poor?"

"You might call it that."

"Then why don't we live in a smaller house? And Mamma wouldn't get so tired. We could eat in the kitchen, it's warmer there, too. We could. . . ."

Madame van Baarnheim's curt voice had broken in with, "It's

possible not to be rich and still keep one's dignity, child. You have a tendency to forget that."

And Klaes' father had pompously resumed with, "Klaes, my child, I'm concerned about you, for I note you have a regrettable tendency to overestimate the things of this world. All this vain agitation of men over trifles, vanities. . . ."

The little girls were listening, open-mouthed. How well their father talked, how rich was his voice, how handsome he was, as he tossed back the iron grey hair from his eyes—he wore his hair romantically long.

"An honest life spent in contemplation, with work, too, of course, but in calmness and quiet, very different from this feverish activity of the cities, is so much finer, so much richer, too, and in a sense more. . . ."

The resonant voice became uncertain.

"Well, that is to say. . . ." Klaes' father had taken up, again, as Madame van Baarnheim brought to the table a bread-pudding topped with currant jelly.

"Klaes," she said, "since you will go on arguing with your father, you must go to bed. You shall have no pudding."

Heavy-hearted, he had left the table. With Madame van Baarnheim you certainly did not argue. But he resented the injustice. And besides, he was hungry. He said nothing, however, till he was at the foot of the stairs, out of his mother's reach. Then he had dared to register his protest.

"It's not a pudding!" he shouted very loudly. "It's only bread and milk! Hypocrites!"

He had been twelve years old at the time.

The same house—it was in that same house that he now lived. But what a difference, now that he reigned there as master! For a moment Klaes van Baarnheim relaxed on the pearl-grey cushions of the car. Why had he remembered this? What had made him think of his parents? Ah yes, it was the pompous tone Jean had used which had made him remember the long and wearisome discourses of his father. Fundamentally, he no longer thought about his childhood, although he professed to venerate the memory of his

parents. They had never loved him, preferring Odilia, who had married a rich man but spoke their language, and favouring Gertrude especially. Essentially little people, whose lack of force took the place of virtue. Klaes had not loved them either, not really. "Hypocrites!" Whenever he thought of them, he still applied that word to them, as he had done in his childhood, outraged at their not having encouraged his efforts or applauded his first successes. Fundamentally, what they secretly blamed him for was his robust health and appetite. They would have preferred to see him humbly vegetate, as they did, vaguely envious, full of proud humility, permitting themselves no comfort, but ostentatiously giving alms, and yet, all the same, with a certain truthfulness and sincerity in their austere way of living. They had never wanted to accept anything from Klaes. They were shocked at his success, for they had so often repeated that their lack of money was due to their honesty that they had convinced themselves it was impossible to have money without some more or less shady compromises. In this way they gave nobility to their defeats. But they were scandalized, not only that Klaes made so much money but that he spent it with a taste for lavishness that he must have inherited from his ancestors, the great van Baarnheim merchants. They began to feel more and more ill at ease in the house as it gradually underwent repairs, became filled with new things, acquired a staff of servants. They had so hardened themselves to their poverty! To renounce it would have been to recognize that their son was more capable than they had been of restoring the prestige of the van Baarnheims. Despite his speechifying, Monsieur van Baarnheim might have weakened. He was ready to melt before the new wallpapers, the soft armchairs, and all the comforts Klaes had brought to the old home, and his wife sensed it. With reason she bore the name of Ursula, the virgin-martyr venerated in Flanders: she even had the same hard face, as polished as a pebble, that may be seen on the saint in her shrine at Bruges. She would not tolerate the idea of that kind of submission to a son she had never loved, and she had decided that they should leave. Odilia was married then, and living in the South of France, from where she occasionally sent

a postcard depicting palm trees, or a small cheque which her mother hid away without saying a word. Gertrude was engaged to be married. They would leave the house, Ursula and her husband, after the marriage of their youngest, and they would live in a *pension* on the other side of town.

The decision had hurt Klaes profoundly. At the age of thirty he had already been the possessor of a small fortune, and would have liked to have his parents finally recognise his worth. Instead of that, they were leaving him as if he were afflicted with leprosy! How could this be? He had set their little draper's shop on its feet again and had turned it into a prosperous business, had made some lucky speculations, and had sunk money in a small brewery that had barely been making its way and had revived it also in a few years. And then, at the very moment that he was considering restoring all its former ostentation to the van Baarnheim house and once again placing the family in the rank it merited, his parents had left him, as if to put him in the wrong! He had sworn never to see them again, and, being at least as proud as his mother, he had kept his word. There had been a moment when he had almost weakened; that was when his father had suddenly died of a heart attack. He thought of his mother, who had already been much affected by Gertrude's death, and ended up by sending an enormous spray of flowers—"Whatever is most expensive," he had told the florist—and had expected a word of thanks or an appeal. But the stiff-necked Ursula, even more rigid beneath her widow's veils, did not send one sole word to her son during the week of the funeral. She had seen in that gift of flowers an indecent display of wealth, the gesture of a parvenu who wants at any price to make an impression. Whereas there had been in it, mingled with much vanity, something of regret and tenderness. Two years later she also had died, and her coffin had been weighted down with flowers. That time, there was not the least tenderness, but a great deal of ostentation and some revenge in the great display of wealth.

How many years had passed since that funeral? And it needed the idle talk of a chauffeur to restore to him the image of his father's lined face, his gentle eyes, his silvery hair, his emphatic way of

speaking . . . and to revive the image of his mother, straight-backed and rigid in her rancour, her unjust rancour, to reawaken that wrath. Roger had told him that anger was not good for him. And he had given way to several fits of temper in the past few days. Elsa's absurd pretences of refusal—it was Elsa who had exasperated him. He had no desire for anything, now.

“ Shall we go to the brewery, sir?”

No, not even that. He did not even want to go to the mill and wander among the familiar machines that he loved to touch, as if they were great tame animals; he did not even want to reprimand here and there someone who would merely shrug in response. The technical manager, Dolls, was perfectly able to run the brewery without him. Ah, things would be changed if he concluded the merger with München. He would be overwhelmed with work, would feel he was living again. Elsa, München, they were his two chief cares at present. Idiotic to be obsessed by a semi-lunatic woman as much as by a business affair of that importance. But the idea that she was living so near him, perhaps hating him, while he had only wanted her welfare. . . . Every time he thought of Elsa, he felt like an injured child.

“ No, Jean, no work today. Instead, let's go . . . why not go to the Arcades?”

That would give him other things to think about. He had not visited that part of the town for years.

Through the narrow glass-covered thoroughfare of the Arcades, a greenish light fell upon the passers-by. For a minute the old man stood motionless. After having made a return into his past, the image of the Arcades of his childhood had come back to him, a marvellous image, slightly blurred, of elegant ladies with fur muffs circulating among the gas-lit shops, of little boys in sailor suits entering the tea-rooms full of mirrors, of dowagers choosing, in the dim light of the jewellers' shops, one by one, the pearls of a necklace. . . .

These were certainly the same narrow little booths with green cloth covers on their counters; these were the same novelty shops

with strange signs, "Material for Artificial Flowers," "Bandoneon, Professor of Music," but where was the gay crowd of people who had filled these echoing corridors with a roar as of the sea, the crowd that pressed against these now melancholy show windows or thronged that antiquated tea-room where, among the green plants and the painted pastoral scenes, two forgotten old ladies were drinking hot chocolate?

Slowly, leaning on Jean's arm, Klaes van Baarnheim walked onward. Almost all the jewellers' shops were closed, their proprietors having emigrated to the modern quarters, to the Rue de Java or the Place Allard. And these shops remained empty, with shutters half lowered over ransacked show-cases that were still adorned with the black velvet that shows up to such advantage the orient of pearls. The little perfume shops and the lace shops and the novelty shops were still open; but under their ornamental *style nouveau* ceilings that had dazzled his generation, the single light bulb threw a meagre light on dusty knick-knacks or faded finery. Now and then a man could be seen entering one or other of the shops, as if furtively; a curtain would be drawn, a bolt shot in a lock. And was there still not another man standing on the opposite side of the Arcade, waiting?

"Ah?" said the brewer. "So it's come to this now, has it?"

Jean prudently made no reply, afraid of irritating his master and losing his vacation. They walked on a little farther still, among the simply-dressed people who were hurrying through, obviously taking a short-cut on their way home.

"I wonder," said Klaes reflectively, "if something couldn't be done here, with a little capital."

"Oh," said Jean contemptuously, "it's not worth the trouble. This part of the town is dead. . . ."

It was true, and the melancholy of the place began to affect Klaes so much that he hurried towards the other end of the Arcades, towards the sunlight and the noisy streets. But as he was about to reach the exit, he was suddenly jostled by a woman who came rushing out of one of the shops.

"Why, Monsieur van Baarnheim!" she exclaimed, in melodramatic surprise.

He drew back uneasily and surveyed her. She was a woman in the forties, short and plump, dressed in black satin, and she was fluttering about him delightedly as if confident that he would recognise her. A childhood friend? She was too young. A business acquaintance? Perhaps. Although a novelty shop. . . . Perhaps she had changed her line:

He bowed politely. "Madame. . . ." he said hesitantly.

The plump little lady gave a fluty laugh, rolled her eyes to Heaven, and spoke with exaggerated delight.

"Madame! He calls me Madame! He doesn't recognize me!"

Her rather porcine face was not unpleasant, but it had a hard expression, despite the small mouth that was outlined with lipstick in a cupid's bow, the abnormally long eyelashes, the complicated coils of bleached hair which fell in ringlets over her forehead. That way of wearing the hair reminded him of someone, and he knitted his brows.

"Oh come, make a little effort," she exclaimed, her laughter trilling loudly now. "Why yes! Ada, little Ada! Don't you remember me? The trip to Beerschel?"

For a minute he remained stupefied. Then suddenly, without pleasure, he remembered.

"Why yes, of course! How stupid of me, Madame. . . ."

"Oh come, Monsieur van Baarnheim, call me Ada for old time's sake. I know it was a lot of years ago, but we don't forget our first loves, as the old song has it. All the same, you must have had so many. . . ."

How could he have forgotten the irritating sound of that pert little laugh, the childish pouting of those lips? True, the little Ada had increased in volume. But he had had enough memories for one day! He decided to liquidate this Ada in five minutes. Heavens, if all the women he'd been unlucky enough to know took it into their heads to pester him now. . . .

"Ada. Why yes, that was years ago. I didn't expect. . . ."

"More than twenty-five years! But I've been watching you

from my modest little sphere, and I've heard all about your success. It seems you have two mills, now!"

"Soon there will be three," he said soberly. Although he had decided to cut this conversation short, it would have been rude, all the same, not to reply.

"Three mills! Why, that's wonderful! What success! And so well earned, for you were always a worker, I remember very well. No matter how late you stayed up at night you were always out of bed at eight in the morning. And yet, God knows, you enjoyed yourself plenty at night!"

She gave another little laugh, shaking her heavy breasts girlishly.

"If I dared to invite you in?" she suggested. "It would be such an honour. I'll only keep you a minute or so?"

She had already half opened the door of the shop.

"Well, you see, I'm in a hurry. I was just passing by."

"Oh, ten minute. won't hurt. I don't forget that it's thanks to you I was able to set up this shop. It would give me such pleasure. . . ."

"Very well, say no more. You will wait for me, Jean."

In the narrow shop, a swarthy little girl was playing with an apparatus for stretching gloves. A feeling of uneasiness shot through Klaes, but he laughed at it the minute afterwards. Of course not! Ada was not going to tell him that! They had not seen each other for twenty-five years.

"This way, this way," she was saying. "If you will be so kind as to come into the back room. . . ."

Holding on to the counter, he followed her, rather unwillingly. But the back room, which he expected to be sordid, turned out to be a veritable boudoir, with violet coloured draperies, a divan upholstered in pale yellow, deep armchairs in green velvet. On a low table stood decanters of liqueurs and glasses. A radio was playing soft music. The shelves were laden with a reassuring quantity of fake Saxe figurines, Negroes in spun glass, dressed dolls. Quite evidently, the person who occupied this spruce little boudoir was a respectable woman. A little reassured, Klaes let himself

down heavily into one of the green velvet chairs. The short walk had tired him. And meanwhile the "little Ada" was fluttering around him.

"Just imagine, for years I've been dreaming of seeing you here! Oh, I'd say to myself, if only I could see Monsieur van Baarnheim again! I was always saying that to my poor mother—she died of cancer. But would I bother you? Never! You've enough to do as it is! Your life's been just one adventure after another, hasn't it? Oh, you're not saying a word?" She wagged a playful finger at him. "How many hearts you must have broken! No, no, I'll not go on, I know you're a very discreet and very gallant man. . . ."

A little stupid, this Ada, as far as he could remember. It seemed to him, now, that he had met her in a teashop where she was employed, and had taken her with him on a business trip. But he didn't feel badly in this atmosphere of shaded lights—in the past few months he had scarcely left the house except to go to the brewery—and he did not object when she poured out a glass of whisky for him.

"Well, Ada, how's business?"

"Fine, sir, fine, if I may say so—after all, you're not the tax-collector! Yes, I've been able to put a little aside. . . ."

"It's quite nice here. Is this where you live?"

"Oh dear no," she exclaimed. "It's—how shall I say?—it's just a *pied-à-terre*, no more. I have a little apartment, oh, quite simple, in the Rue de Java, on the corner of the square. But I hope, in a few more years—I oughtn't to say it but I can tell it to an old friend like you, can't I?" She stifled a laugh, putting her hand in front of her cupid's bow mouth. "I'm hoping to buy a little house, oh, just a shack, on the French Riviera."

Was it the whisky? He felt completely at ease, now. "Here, at any rate," he reflected, "is someone who has nothing against me!" Complacently he surveyed the gold bracelet on her wrist, the rings that loaded down her plump fingers.

"A house on the French Riviera! I'm damned! Evidently lace and gloves sell better than beer."

She gave another of her girlish laughs, shrill, artificial, and he

recalled, all at once, the suspicious looking men in the street; now he understood this comfortable back room with its waiting bed, understood the care with which the plump little lady was dressed.

"Oh, Klæes!" she simpered, "you'll let me call you by your name, won't you, for old times' sake? Whatever you do, don't condemn me. You see, the Arcades aren't fashionable any more. Life became difficult, I had a stroke of bad luck"—she nodded in an embarrassed way towards the door, behind which the little girl was playing—"and good Heavens, when a woman's not too ugly, she has temptations. But," she added vivaciously, "believe me, I only associate with respectable men, of the best society. Anyway, as I said, I'm hoping to retire soon. Oh, I have no complaints. I've had a full life, and now I haven't any worries."

"Of course, of course," Klæes cordially agreed. So, the woman he had known as a tea-room waitress now associated with men of "the best society," and was going to retire to the French Riviera. That apartment of hers in the Rue Java must cost quite a bit. And when you came to think, she owed all this to him, in a way. If he hadn't taken her out of that English tea-room and sweet-shop, she'd still be gazing hungrily at the displays of bon-bons in the show-cases. Moreover, she was still good-looking. How old would she be now? She was eighteen or nineteen when he first met her. That would make her about forty-four now. She certainly didn't look it. A little short in the legs, though—she'd always been, and the weight she had put on accentuated that unattractive wobble. But her face was barely lined, there were only a few unruly wrinkles, and her skin was white, well cared for, and her terribly long lashed eyes were still lively. Anyone could see that this was a woman who had succeeded in life.

"A little more whisky?" she suggested. "Oh, yes, yes, to celebrate our meeting again! Do you know, Klæes, you've scarcely changed? A little fatter, perhaps, but what right have I to mention it, since I . . . But you know, some men prefer me like this. I was so thin, at eighteen! But your stature and expression have remained absolutely the same. I'm sure the women still run after you?"

The question caused Klæes a slight uneasiness. Was she alluding

to something in particular? He studied her and was reassured. Ada's face was merely flushed with an eagerness to please.

"Let's talk about something else," he said curtly, emptying his glass. "You see, I don't have much time. . . . But I'm very glad to see that you have . . . prospered."

Once more she held her hand over her mouth, convulsed with laughter.

"Naturally I have some troubles with the tax-collector!" she said. "According to him, my style of living doesn't correspond to my declared earnings. Only yesterday I was sent one of those complicated forms to fill in. And I don't understand such things. A woman alone always has such difficulty. Klaes, I wish you'd cast an eye over it before you go. That would be nice of you. . . ."

She had got up and was rummaging in a little chest of drawers, searching for something among a confusion of lingerie. Yes, her legs were decidedly short and her ankles were thick, there were ridges of swollen flesh above the neat little black satin slippers with silver buckles. But her waist was still small, the hips generously rounded, and that gaiety of hers was very comforting. . . .

"I'm afraid I'm imposing upon you, Klaes. But if you would just give it a quick glance, I'd be grateful. A man is always so much more competent in these things."

Her abundant and perfumed bosom was leaning over him.

"Wait a minute. Listen. Someone's asking for me. . . ."

Klaes also listened. A shrill little voice could be heard on the other side of the door.

"Auntie! There's a gentleman here for you!"

"Tell him I'm busy," Ada said sharply.

"He says he already came once, a while ago."

"Tell him—tell him I'm busy for the whole afternoon."

"Yes, Auntie."

A brief confabulation could be heard, then the door of the shop closed.

"Yes," said Ada in reply to his questioning look, "she calls me Auntie, it sounds more proper. And she's so incredibly big for her age. Oh, of course, I'll never see twenty again, but still. . . ."

Klaes was about to reply with a compliment, when his eyes fell upon the tax form.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed with some admiration. "If he taxes you on that amount, you must have quite a cosy income. Ha, ha, you little minx! A glove and lace shop, eh?"

Warmed by that feminine presence beside him, he was not only talking familiarly to her now but his hand was already on her hip, a heavy, proprietary hand.

"What have you invested your savings in?"

"Railroads, Royal Dutch, synthetic rubber. . . ."

"Rubber?" he exclaimed indignantly, already taking a bossy attitude. "Why, they must give you a ridiculously low interest! And rubber's not safe, just now. Seems' they're going to replace rubber with plastic, on cylinders, for instance. Those stocks can drop any minute. You must show me your files, girl! I'll bet they're in a pretty mess. I'm going to put some order into all this. Your savings are going to be moved around some, you'll see. When I put my hand to anything. . . ."

"Oh, Klaes," she sighed, "you're just the same! What mastery! What. . . ."

"Auntie," said the little voice.

"What?" (She was furious).

"There's a gentleman for you."

"But I told you. . . ."

"It's not the same gentleman!" bawled the little girl.

"Throw him out and lock the door," shouted Ada, unmindful of being overheard.

"You're so kind, Klaes," she said, turning towards him, "so kind to spend more time on me! Shall I show you my papers?"

"Yes, that's it, let me have a look."

He had now settled himself comfortably in the big armchair, having taken complete possession of the little boudoir.

"Come, where's the file?"

They settled down more comfortably on the divan. Armed with a pencil, he checked the securities that had possibilities, while the little shopkeeper admiringly looked on.

"That one's good. That one, too, it can go up. That one . . . no. You must sell. That one, it's stable. Wait. There may be a little stir in the next fortnight, if things get a little tense."

From time to time he pinched her waist or dropped his hand on her generous bosom, and she made no objection but laughed coquettishly, delighted to keep him there such a long time.

"Oh, Klaes!" she murmured, patting her complicated ringlets, "What a marvellous life you must have had! What success! And what an amount of good you've done! Everyone sings your praises, Dr. Franck, Pastor Huizinga. . . ."

He could not hold back a guffaw.

"You know the Pastor? I can't imagine him coming here to buy gloves."

"Oh," she said, with a shocked look, "I didn't mean that at all. But a very respectable man comes here who gives me all the gossip. No, no, don't ask his name, I'll only tell you he's very well placed, almost official. And he's spoken about you, told me about that handsome gesture of yours, you know, taking that girl into your home. What a beautiful act, Klaes, what a beautiful act. . . ."

She stopped, surprised. One of her breasts had half slipped out of her dress, which the old man had begun to unbutton. Klaes suddenly sat up.

"That too, you've heard talk about that?"

"Why yes," she said, "isn't it true?"

"Yes, yes, but you didn't hear anyone say. . . ."

"What?"

She looked at him in sincere amazement, uncomprehending.

"But you think I did the right thing? I mean to say. . . . The mother. . . ."

In the dim light of the room, with the alcohol warming him, close to that unbuttoned woman, he found himself confessing his worries over Elsa, and with a great feeling of relief waited to hear Ada's words as if for a balm that would definitely cure him.

"The mother?" she said, making a wry face. "She's . . . rather a common person, isn't she?"

"A typical wench of the Triangle," he said wrathfully. "A

waitress. And she limps. And I settled a pension on her! And she complains, just imagine, she dares to complain!"

The former waitress in the English tea-room gave a little laugh of disgust.

"You're too kind, Klaes, I always knew it. How horrible—a woman who limps! How much do you give her, exactly?"

He mentioned a figure.

"That much! Why, it's possible to live very well and even put something aside with that. Klaes, you're a child, a veritable child. I'll bet you're surrounded with people trying to exploit you!"

She pressed a little closer, and her dress opened still wider.

"When I think of it, I get really wild. After all the good you've done (Oh, Klaes! No!) and the hospitals you've helped (Now, now, Klaes!) And all your charities. . . . Darling. . . ."

Bending over that fat little woman who was heaving with exaggerated sighs, Klaes van Baarnheim, despite the pain in his shoulder, felt happier than he had been for a long time.

Chapter Eight

JUST when Autumn gave promise of arriving, it was summer that suddenly overwhelmed the somnolent town between its two canals. A torrid summer rose from the mists, and its clamminess penetrated everywhere, the new apartment buildings with their dazzling white walls, the narrow little jewellery and broker shops blackened by the smoke of the nearby railway station, the streets of the business district, laid out in straight lines, the severe-looking residences of the well-to-do, and the sun beat down upon the quays that were deserted by the crowds. Even the dark and winding streets of the Triangle did not escape. This Nordic town, very little used to the sun's excesses, was barely able to protect itself against this onslaught and appeared as if stupefied. The heavy shutters of black wood, made for winter nights, were now shut upon stifling rooms. The dusty boulevards were empty, and all the upper part of the town took on an abandoned look.

But in the narrow streets of the Triangle women in house-coats were taking the air, sitting on rush-bottomed chairs in the shade, and children were sleeping out of doors, pressing their burning cheeks against the cool stone of the doorways. In the courtyard of the Chinese restaurant, the peddler of paper birds slept on a mat in a current of air which rustled his fragile merchandise, and some children were slyly waiting for the heat to overpower him, when they would pounce and pillage. The prostitutes of the *Trois Matelôts* could not stand the heat and one after another they came to sprawl on the blue balcony, exhibiting their livid thighs.

The muffled rumbling of the brewery was like the roaring of an

oven. And on the decks of the canal-boats, among the piles of rusty iron and the skins of tanned cowhide stretched between posts like crucified bats, some incredible vagabonds, human wrecks that had emerged from heaven only knew where, all of them bent and shrunk by the years of cold and fog they had endured, were stretching their bony legs and arms, stripping off their cleverly disposed rags which gave them the aspect of mummies, and timidly uncovering portions of wrinkled white flesh which, after all, was human.

Fortunately there were sanctuaries of relative coolness—the basement cafés, where the sailors slept with their heads on the tables among the dewy earthenware mugs of beer, and where shopkeepers and office workers, shorn of their usual prejudices by the heat, gathered to talk in low voices, now and then ordering more mugs of beer, that inevitable excuse.

“Never was there anything like this! Right in the middle of September!”

At the brewer’s, a big side-room, formerly the stables, and now connected to the house by a long corridor, was reserved for the beggars and petitioners who came there each day. Mademoiselle Paule was sitting behind a small table in the corridor, fountain pen in hand, dressed, despite the heat, in a very neat but badly cut tailored suit, which exaggerated the narrowness of her shoulders.

“In hot weather,” she reflected, as if in reproach, “people seem to make themselves scarce. “Only ten today—not even a dozen!”

She was sincerely indignant. Of course, in winter, when the canals were frozen and the poor people were without work, you saw them coming here by the dozens! She was really kept busy, then, taking down names, asking questions, making out slips to submit to the brewer, giving them food and money, getting rid of them, reigning over the scared little flock with all her curt authority. “I would never have known Life if I hadn’t met Monsieur van Baarnheim,” she was in the habit of saying in front of the brewer, who always smiled complacently. And it was true. She was by nature a little ferret-like office worker who would have vegetated for ever in some small job or other, if she had not

happened to come under the sway of the brewer. Homely, sickly, endowed with little enthusiasm or sensitiveness, coldly intelligent and lacking in passion, Mademoiselle Paule would have lived without being aware of it, eaten up with gloomy boredom and pointless pride, if she had not discovered in her new employment what she called pity. It was in a way her profession, although officially she was a stenographer, since Klaes very early and almost exclusively employed her in the duties arising from his charitable works. She was the one who ransacked the town and ruthlessly brought to light the most secret miseries; and she gave herself to this scrupulous research with the passion of an antiquarian. "I don't allow myself a minute of leisure," she said, which was a fact. There was also relief to be given, inquiries to make, accounts to render; for there were times when Klaes interested himself more or less in Good Deeds—at the present time, for instance, he was less ardent, but a few weeks before he had kept her on the hop, demanding much more detailed reports than usual. Yes, Mademoiselle Paule's profession was, indeed, pity. And she felt it; but it was more in the sense of the folk-saying, "Better to be envied than pitied"—with a nuance of contempt. She found a certain comfort in the sight of so many derelicts, of whom she was wont to say, "They don't have our education," to excuse their shocking excesses of all kinds. And, unlike Klaes, she let no sentiment enter into this relief work; she was captious and meddlesome. She could even, at sight of her master's show of pity or indulgence (alternating with disgust) allow herself the luxury of a supplementary pity. He expected appreciation and gratitude? Well, for her part, she expected nothing. She was not that naïve, she did good for the sake of doing good.

This heat wave was unendurable. The brewer gave her nothing to do. He was having long conversations with Philippe and seemed to be waiting for something. And there she was, useless, sitting at the little table in the corridor where it was hot. . . . In the big room some silent beggars were waiting for their meal. Nobody else would come. Through helping people, Mademoiselle Paule had come to the point of not liking at all anyone who had no need

of her help. And she detested this heat which made the poor beggars on the quays look like royal idlers. Of what use was education, good will, and correct behaviour in this hot weather?

On the other side of the corridor there was a looking-glass. It was in that looking-glass that Mademoiselle Paule saw herself welcoming the unfortunates with her curt kindness, distributing alms like punishments, questioning, gesticulating, dominating this little world, despite her small size. She saw her life parading past in that mirror, the life of a superior and consistently proper woman, cultured and educated, condescending to the level of the ignorant and the poor. How could she not detest the summer weather, which emptied the mirror and left her there, inactive, staring round-eyed through her thick spectacles, as she suddenly came out of a dream to confront a reality that nothing concealed: her weak and homely body?

The Van Eyck in front of him was a fake, but he did not know it. In any case, the fact would not have disturbed him much. To him, "The Madonna of the Merchants" was not a Van Eyck, it was an important victory, his conquering of the Dutch market. The heavy curtains of Genoese velvet, the thick carpet, the massive radio, the various objects of nickel and pigskin scattered about the room comprised an ensemble in as bad taste as Ada's boudoir. But that, also, didn't matter. Every one of these objects had a significance, the significance was a sum of money, and adding those figures was the first occupation of the brewer's mind upon waking, it gave him strength and courage, helped him to carry on.

"See here," he said to Philippe, "that little woman has set me on my feet again. Those spells of heartburn (he delicately applied that name to his nocturnal sufferings) have almost disappeared. As for the dizzy spells, I'm much better. And I'm less nervous. My appetite is coming back. I still have twinges of rheumatism, it's true, but who reaches seventy without some small physical handicap: You were all worried, weren't you, the other day? Nothing to worry about! I've still strength and to spare. They'll hear from me yet!"

He seemed to be throwing out a challenge, his cheeks flushed with the effort, his eyes glittering, and he radiated such vitality that for a minute Philippe wondered if Roger had not been mistaken and if, in fact the old man was not going to regain his health. He had recovered his customary joviality during the past fortnight, scolding Mademoiselle Paule, tormenting Maalens with new pleasure ("Dastardly fellow! I see by the way you walk that you've been drinking my brandy again!") Laughing when his words made the book-keeper stagger, in fact), he went out every two or three days towards the end of the afternoon on mysterious errands that aroused Madame Nuñez' curiosity. Was it that "little woman" of whom he had spoken for the first time just now, to whom Klaes van Baarnheim owed his new-found aplomb? All the same, there must be something in the wind. There was a kind of feverishness in his attitude, in the fixity of his eyes, when he believed himself to be alone. Philippe was intrigued. The brewer must have some plan in mind, for never had he been seen like this except when he was expecting a victory from one minute to another. True, there was the München affair, still pending. If the brewer succeeded in absorbing that important firm—in a bad way from mismanagement—his rather limited market would expand in a remarkable way. And he must be rather sure of succeeding, for Philippe had learned from Yves Sarfati that Klaes was already preparing to launch a new beer to be produced by the united firms of München and van Baarnheim.

"What about this München affair, Uncle?" he asked, to show he was not fooled.

"It's coming along, it's coming, my boy. Do you know? I haven't given another sign of life since I made my last proposal! I'm acting as though I'd lost interest in the affair, see, and I even let it be known by Van Dyck, who's in Strasburg, and who's talked about it of course, that I'm considering a merger with Brauer. And this morning, guess who comes to see me? München's publicity manager—a fellow unfit for the job, by the way, but I'll change all that—and he told me, as if it was something of no importance and as if he'd merely dropped in out of politeness,

he told me he'd heard my proposition being talked about and that the two per cent was insufficient, perhaps, and that. . . ."

Despite the fact that Philippe had some twenty years of transactions of this kind behind him, the obvious ruses of business men always amused him. How in the world could they go on letting themselves be caught?

"Fundamentally," he reflected, "it must not be naïveté but a kind of sport, a game with rules that must be respected. They pretend to be fooled, and through pretending they soon come to believe in it really, and then it's bankruptcy. No stupider than anything else. Like a game of golf, in fact. Make money! Make love, with scruples! How boring life would be without that!"

"And do you realize, Philippe, the profits I'm going to make—that we will make, for of course I want you to have some shares in this if we manage to. . . ."

Shares, yes. To cheat on income tax. That was another exciting amusement of business men. Or to display his generosity. "I've been complimenting him," Philippe reflected, "in thinking it's just a game to him. For he believes in it. He believes in the pleasure of making money and of doing good. With all his strength, he really wants to pull off this deal which will give him some exhausting work and bring in money he won't know what to do with. And he wants it to the point of being in better health when he feels he's going to succeed. After all, perhaps he's a lucky person."

"And there's another thing," the old brewer was now saying in a lower voice. "I believe I've not been too stupid in another little affair. Look at this."

From beneath the pillow against which he was propped, he drew out a sheet of Nile green paper and handed it to Philippe.

"Read this. You'll tell me afterwards what you think."

Philippe took the letter and read:

"Sir, I am a friend of Madame Elsa, who has been, for a long time now, your good lady. You will easily understand, sir, that her dignity prevents her from writing, and that I am writing

in her stead, putting myself in her position. You can well imagine that even I find it difficult to write. As for me, I am among her friends, a kind of protégé of Madame Elsa. I eat with her often, but it's no longer possible, seeing the situation in which you have placed her. It is very necessary, sir, to reply to her as usual, but if you need a good gardener, I am one who has been without work but am very skilful, my address is Rue Haute, number 65, at the end of the court to the right."

The letter was signed in a good hand, with many flourishes: Raymond Chevassu.

"Well?" said the old man impatiently.

Philippe raised his head, not without surprise. Klaes' eyes were again sparkling with malice.

"Well. . . . This is the kind of letter you could expect, I suppose," he said cautiously.

He did not know what to say in reply to the evident and curious satisfaction of his uncle. In fact, he was not a little surprised to see that the idea of making Elsa leave town was something more than a caprice.

"But don't you understand?" said Klaes impatiently. "It's like the München affair! Exactly the same thing. My tactics have succeeded. For in this matter, too, I've given no sign of life, and now they're attacking. They expect an offer from me. I give them less than a month. Ada was right."

"Oh, if Ada said so, then evidently. . . ." said Philippe, ironically.

He'd been mistaken in believing the old man's health had improved. That feverish excitement over the most trifling things—it was a sign. Apparently Klaes attached as much importance to this pitiful affair of Elsa as to an affair involving millions. It must be the first sign of slipping in a failing mind.

"Why yes, that's what she told me. She said, 'That woman wants to raise the bid, nothing more. And you shouldn't let yourself be led by the nose.' That's what she told me again only yesterday. And now this morning I receive this letter!"

The almost infantile joy with which the big wrinkled hands

smoothed the green paper made Philippe wild. He had been inclined for serious business this afternoon. After all, he, too, was a money-maker by profession, and there was Simone, and Louissette, and Clara. . . .

"It's clear that your Ada is a prophetess," he said drily. "Nothing more to it! What more could there be? Shall we talk about these shares? You say you will transfer to me. . . ."

"There's no reason why I should transfer some to you if I don't make a little profit," said the old financier, again speaking calmly and slowly. "We'll authorize each share at 1,500 francs, to start with, and between you and me. . . ."

They discussed the matter. Between them the humid heat continued to insinuate itself, heavy as a presence.

In Alberte's bedroom it was summer, too. And, coming out of a half sleep, she opened her eyes, resting them vaguely upon the gleaming furniture, the gauze curtains, the delicate panelling which turned this former little drawing-room into a real bed-room for a young girl. But perhaps it lacked something—a touch of the charming disorder that we like to imagine surrounding a sleeping girl? Or perhaps more than all else, in the midst of so much fragile elegance, it was Alberte herself who was out of place, with her robust, vital, and vigorous body which needed, to be perfectly beautiful, a little space.

In the tepid obscurity of the small bedroom, she stretched herself, suddenly freed of all awkwardness and constraint. The mirror reflected her face, her loosened hair. As she studied the reflection she suddenly remembered a day when she had surveyed herself like this. She had been naked, in the wooden tub in the middle of the top-storey room at the Three Storks, and had been furiously soaping herself. She had been happy. Elsa was sobbing, making a great show of fine feelings.

"They're taking her away from me, my only child!"

Three blowsy women were admiring this tearful scene and playing their part brilliantly.

"And you, Bertha," exclaimed one of the matrons, "you're not

saying a word! A heart of stone, you must have! And your poor mother, who's sacrificed herself for you every day of your life—fourteen years!”

Those women had often, on other occasions, raked Elsa over the coals, but the taste for drama united them around the tub where Alberte was soaping and scrubbing herself as if determined to scrape off her skin along with the dust of the Triangle.

“And you're not saying a word to your poor mother, who'll die of grief, maybe.”

No, she didn't say anything; she was already off and away in that future they had promised her, finally rescued from this past, from Elsa and her displays of emotion, and her secret hardness, rescued from the familiar customers, the laughter, the slow hours of wallowing in this disorder she detested above all things, this disorder that was everywhere and was overwhelming her very soul.

Rescued. She had been rescued from all that. She could still hear the tone of complicity in the three women's voices: “Maybe this will mean a lot of money to you, Bertha! Sooner or later, blood will tell.” But no, that was not what she wanted. All she wanted was to be freed. That she would have to earn it, she willingly admitted; but at least she should be allowed to forget the fact. . . .

Her father's allusions, these days, had become more unambiguous, and they were what had brought back to her these uneasy memories, evoking the long years of her neglected childhood. Or perhaps it was the prostrating heat which brought back memories of those somnolent days, those hours of idleness, that sloth.

She went towards the French window overlooking the garden and pressed her forehead against the shutter. Through the narrow crack her eyes followed the path bordering the lawn and going down to the clump of blue bushes. Beyond, there was the narrow road where, in winter, the waggons got stuck in the mud, the narrow branch of the river, the wooden bridge, and past the bridge the dark houses of the Triangle, the alleyways filled with the stench of beer and urine and rancid grease, the squawking voices of gramophones, to the cool labyrinth of courtyards, the little dance-

halls which opened at nightfall round the minuscule market-place bordered with trees in which lanterns were strung.

Suddenly, with unnecessary violence, she stepped back. Had she not just now, for a few seconds, thought of the Triangle without anger, even with a certain indulgence? Yet they were her enemies, those dishevelled people who, in summer, settled down in their low doorways light-heartedly to sing, and who, in winter, huddled in dirty kitchens, getting drunk on thick, syrupy beer? Were they not the ones who had encouraged Elsa in her phantasy, were they not the ones who had urged her to ask for more money in a way that injured her daughter? And finally, were they not the ones who bolstered her in that absurd resistance, doubtless with the hope of prying big sums of money out of the brewer? How ashamed she was, how terribly ashamed to be mixed up in that affair! How ruthlessly she judged them, from the height of her false dignity! Those tales of travel she had read with only confused understanding, those badly chosen dresses she wore, those good manners she believed she thoroughly possessed, gave her the right to judge them, so she thought. She never wanted to hear of them again! Only by forgetting them would she rid herself of that embarrassment which constantly paralyzed her when confronting her father's eyes, the sneers of her aunt, the ironical smile of Philippe. "Oh, if only she would go away!" she thought, almost prayerfully.

With an energetic hand she twisted her hair up into a severe knot, as if it were responsible for her reverie. Then, taking a big black notebook out of a little desk, she went down towards the kitchen, with pacified conscience, to check the accounts of Gudule, the cook.

Chapter Nine

IT was cool in the courtyard of the Celestial Empire, the Chinese restaurant of the Triangle. From the basement kitchen was wafted an occasional sound of frying. Against the wall, suspended from a stick by strings of raffia, the multi-coloured flock of paper birds, blown by a gust of wind, rustled from time to time, then everything sank again into silence. Squatting on the straw mat, two men were passing a bottle back and forth with languid and almost ritual gestures. The sun drew the shadow of a doorway on the rough pavement. One of the men, naturally small of stature, was enveloped in a quantity of loose clothing that gave him the aspect of a formless bundle. His cap was pulled down over his eyes, he seemed to be prostrated by the heat, and he did not raise his head except to drink with prudent slowness from the bottle of red wine. The other man, a Chinese, was naked to the waist, and his hard, ivory-like torso was that of a boy, contrasting with his greyish face lined with an infinity of wrinkles, but his alert little dark eyes also belied the age of that face. Beside him in a wooden crate could be seen the materials he used in his strange trade—sheets of multi-coloured paper, some reeds, a jar of odoriferous paste, and a brush dipped in a red concoction. He stretched out a thin, childlike arm towards the bottle.

“Well?” he said, in a clear, high voice.

“Well,” said the other man slowly, “I know her, now. That’s all. She talks and talks. Ha, you’ve done a lot of things, but I bet you never had yourself paid a hundred francs, like I was, just to listen to a crazy woman talk and talk, all the time managing to

drink like a fireman." He broke into a slow, heavy laughter. "You and me, now," he went on, "we're chums. So you talk and I talk. Good. But pay money to talk to someone you don't know, like she does? I call that something!"

He tilted the bottle to his lips, his eyes half shutting

"You meet people on boats who talk and talk," said the Chinese, who gloried in having been a steward in the old days. And he, too, half shut his eyes as he raised the bottle to his lips.

"Oh yes, on boats!" said the bundle of rags. "But I don't know anything about boats, nor she, either. But now, there's no more money. So I wrote a letter like you told me, and I've got the answer. Here it is."

Carefully his hand delved into the mass of clothing over his chest—the loose waistcoat, the greasy sweater—and brought forth a rather clean sheet of paper.

"Sir," he read in an emphatic voice, "I am greatly honoured at receiving your communication of. . ."

"That's good," said the Chinese with satisfaction. "That means he honours you, he has confidence in you. . ."

"I shall stop taking an interest in the future of Madame Damiaen, if she does not agree to leave town," the bundle read on, "under the conditions I have stipulated, which made generous provisions for her future life. Considering, after studying the contents of your letter, that you may have a salutary influence over her, I am ready to compensate you for your trouble if you succeed in persuading her. Believe me, sir, very cordially yours. . ."

"He thinks you're living with her," said the Chinese knowingly, "since he talks about your troubles. That's good, very good. There'll be money in it for us, yes, some money."

"Us?" Who, us?" said Raymond-the-bundle, who was not lacking in finesse.

"You and me. Since I was the one that told you to write the letter."

"That's so," the other admitted fairly. Then, with immediate enthusiasm, "We'll buy some wine, we'll get us some girls. . ."

"We have not yet got the money!"

"But we'll have it! For she's got to go!"

A shadowy form had approached.

"Who's got to go?"

It was Elsa's voice. She was leaning against the wall, a pink kimono wrapped over her flat bosom, a long fringed Spanish shawl draped round her shoulders, despite the heat.

"Why, Madame Elsa! Sit down, won't you?" said Raymond effusively, moving over to make room for her on the mat.

"I'm not sitting down," she said arrogantly. "Hand me the bottle."

Raymond gave a regretful glance at the bottle, three-quarters empty, but even so was about to hold it out to her when the Chinese stopped him.

"Don't you think we better talk, Madame Elsa?" he said softly.

"Talk?" she said, bewildered. "If it's to keep me from drinking," she went on emphatically and arrogantly, "there's no use talking. I know where to go. Only this morning they gave me a bottle, one of the best, at the Spotted Trout. And they said to me—listen to this—they said, 'We remember you and how you were brought up to wear lace, and we'll see to it that you lack for nothing. A woman with an education like yours'." . . .

"Oh, now, Madame Elsa," said Raymond, interrupting her good-humouredly, "you're not going to start telling your stories again. It's your pleasure, you pay for it, right. But no free shows!"

The Chinese raised his hand.

"Let Madame Elsa talk, Raymond. I'm interested. Where's the bottle they gave you, Madame Elsa?"

"I didn't want it," she said with sudden volubility. "It was a good bottle, though, marked Grand Reserve, with a date—you see I'm telling the truth? But I said to them, 'I don't accept alms,' I said, 'I'll give it to the poor,' I said. And that's what I did!"

The Chinese laughed softly to himself. From the box beside him, he drew out a long sheet of white paper and began to fold it carefully, without raising his eyes to Elsa.

"The people at the Spotted Trout," he muttered, as if addressing no one in particular, "don't give anything away. They threw you

out. Maybe those bad people kicked you out. Did they? No money, no politeness and no wine. 'I'm to give you my wine?' they say. And they say 'No.' 'No,' they say, 'for you'll never pay me back. You've got no more money.' Yes, every one makes fun of you, throws you out. At the Spotted Trout, and here, too."

Elsa had straightened up, her cheeks blazing, her eyes flashing.

"That's not true," she said, weakly furious, her voice feverish and trembling. "They did give it to me! They didn't throw me out! And I did give it to the poor! 'I don't accept alms,' I said. 'You have a heart of gold,' they said, and. . ."

"Oh, it's hard to be poor," the voice of the Chinese went on, thin and monotonous. "We don't want to accept anything, or ask anything. . . . Then, all the same, we accept, we ask. But who gives to the poor? Who listens to the poor? Not the people at the Spotted Trout, certainly, for they're bad people, they yell, they yell so loud that everyone can hear. . . ."

"That's not true!"

She almost screamed, and she dug her fingernails into the wall behind her, as if she were pinned there in a frightful torment, incapable of moving. The Chinese, now, under Raymond's admiring gaze, was carefully pasting a light strip of bamboo to the paper he had folded in the form of wings.

"And yet it's easy to have money," he said to the bird that was already fluttering between his nimble fingers. "Then you do what you like, you come and go. . . ."

"You drink," broke in Raymond's deep voice, for at this evocation he was unable to contain himself. "You eat tripe, you. . . ."

"You go to the taverns and you order what you like, you give presents. . . ."

"Yes, presents to friends, you have fun, you. . . ."

An odd little dry laugh interrupted their duet. Surprised, they looked up, to see an unaccustomed flicker of spite on Elsa's face.

"I see," she said. "You're both in this plot, aren't you?" she went on volubly. "You want to get rid of me, you want to have your share of the Bank Damiaen, for that's my name, Damiaen,

like the bank. The Damiaens managed to cast me aside, but now they need me! They want me to go away, but I'll not go. And they're the ones that are going to have their troubles, now!"

"The Damiaen bankers don't care a damn for you, Madame Elsa," said Raymond benevolently. "You've got to get that into your head. The Damiaens don't have anything to do with you. They're not the ones who'll pay to have you go, it's. . ."

"You see, they're paying me to leave?" she exclaimed triumphantly. "If I had my rights, why would they want to drive me off, tell me that?"

Still laughing in that strange, malevolent way, she left the two men sitting there in astonishment.

"All the same, there's something in what she says," said Raymond, after a moment. "Why does he want to drive her away, that old fellow? There's something behind it!"

The Chinese had resumed his patient work.

"Behind everything there's something," he said calmly. "But you're not behind, you're in front. And in front, there's some money to be made."

Raymond nodded assent. He always followed his comrade's advice. Picking up the bottle hopefully, he tried to draw out a few more drops. Meanwhile, the white bird finished, the Chinese dipped his brush in a saucer of mixed paint, and, to represent the eye, added one red dot.

Chapter Ten

EVERYONE was finally worn out by the inexorable heat. Each day a storm was expected that would mark the beginning of the autumn rains. But no storm came. The weather had somewhat sharpened the brewer's temper. München had still not yielded, nor had Elsa. The rhythm of his visits to Ada notably slowed down. He had ceased to feel comforted in the little green and violet boudoir where he was flutteringly awaited by that forty-year-old woman, decidedly rather fat. Then, that mania she had of putting into his hands just when he was leaving a batch of papers—an urgent debt, a bill to pay—had ended up by displeasing him. He liked to think of himself as playing a lavishly generous role, but he did not like to be exploited. Not to mention that his painful breathing spells had returned, which he attributed to a special kind of fatigue. . . . Suddenly, during a memorable scene, Ada passed over to the rank of "ingrates" whose names he never wanted to hear again. And she, who had entertained the most brilliant hopes, was left in a daze. True, she had gone too far, had shown very little subtlety when she had expressed the hope that the old brewer would "make a future" for the swarthy little girl. It had been clearly signified to her by a van Baarnheim at the top of his form that although he looked after his own children he took very little interest in those of others, and that the price she was putting on her charms seemed to him, in the long run, very exaggerated, and admissible only if calculated according to weight. Having thrown out this witticism, he went off in excellent humour and proceeded to forget the plump little dealer in gloves and lace.

But while waiting for the German reply before getting down to work again, his temper soured anew.

"Well now, after all, this is inconceivable! I feel like playing a trick on München—maybe I'll associate myself with another firm. See here, suppose we bought out a liquor business? Or soda water? With an advertising campaign in the Spring?"

Pause. Then, without transition, "And what does that imbecile expect? That I'll make her a better offer? After all, I'm not a fool! Suppose we call in Chevassu for a conference?"

Philippe listened without manifesting interest. It was necessary not to appear to take this craze seriously; Klaes might be carried a little too far. Visibly, his anxiety was taking shape. He went so far as to wonder out loud, in Philippe's presence, whether Alberte might not be, to a certain extent, aiding and abetting her mother.

"Alberte!" exclaimed Philippe, unable to contain his laughter. "Why, she's incapable of having such a thought, even!"

"Oh," said Klaes quickly, "I was only joking."

But that very afternoon he summoned his daughter.

Alberte could not get over her surprise. Usually it was at dawn that he summoned her, when he was suffering from insomnia. But rarely did he do so in the afternoon, when she was working on the household accounts with Gudule or making up parcels with Mademoiselle Paule to send to hospital patients, or ordering the menus or the flowers if there were guests to dinner, household tasks that had been handed over to her by Madame Nuñez, who had unburdened herself of them to read mystery stories in her bedroom. But the old man seemed to be in excellent humour and called her over to him with unaccustomed cordiality.

"Well, child? What were you doing?"

"I was planning the dinner for. . ."

"Good, good," he said, without giving her time to finish.

"Always busy, eh? That's good. Tell me, Alberte, won't it be your birthday soon?"

"In a fortnight, Father."

"What about celebrating it, eh? I'm going to make you a

present you'll have no reason to complain about, my girl. I'm very satisfied with you, very satisfied. You're the one that keeps the house going. Yes, yes, I've noticed it, your aunt does nothing. But then, she's always been like that. My parents spoiled her, they thought she was ladylike because she went to no trouble for anything. Ladylike! Lazy, rather; a good-for-nothing!"

His eyes came back to Alberte, whom he had a little forgotten.

"What was I saying? Oh yes, your birthday. You've made a great deal of progress, my child, especially this year. You've developed, matured, you know how to enter a little into conversation."

She flushed, very ill at ease, and tried in vain to read in the crafty little eyes, half shut now, what he wanted of her.

"Yes, yes," he went on insinuatingly, "I'm very satisfied, very satisfied. It's a memorable date for me, you know, your twenty-first birthday. More than six years now, you've been living here with us. You've always been very good, discreet, quickly adapting yourself. Very good. You've kept your promises, I'll keep mine. And I may even do more than I promised, you'll see, you'll see. That's the way I am, and always have been: fair. Behave well with me, I'll behave well with you. Do what you ought, I'll do what I ought and even a little something more. But everything must be above-board. And if anyone tries to bamboozle me, then watch out, I can be terrible. I'm not one to let myself be blackmailed, ever! I'm fair, but I'm not a fool. You're not satisfied? Then get out! The grumblers and complainers will get nothing out of me—nothing, ever! Not a penny!"

A little breathless from his pretended fit of temper, he waited a minute, observing Alberte from beneath his heavy eyelids. But he saw nothing but her lowered eyes, her stubborn forehead. Could it be possible? Were the mother and daughter plotting together? Had the girl managed to conceal the fact for such a long time? He felt a rising tide of anger—he had always been so sure that she admired him, was happy, imagining nothing better than this life and this satisfaction—an anger which he cleverly directed away from her.

"I've always been like that," he went on. "Even with my parents. They behaved badly towards me, very badly. But they were my parents, so I saw to it that they never lacked anything. But not a visit did I pay them, and their funerals—you can ask anyone, there were flowers as if for . . . for a Minister. They sneered at me. They said, 'We don't need money, Klaes! We don't need a servant, we're used to doing without!'" (His mind was wandering, now, as he visualized the hard little face of his mother, the face of his father, lips pursed, looking like a child that wants to sample a dish but dares not. One glance at his wife always restored to him his look of importance and again he would be declaiming pompous phrases, inexhaustibly, in his resonant voice. . . . Suddenly Klaes became aware of Alberte). "Well, they were my parents, but despite that, I never saw them again. You hear me, never again, not once! That's the way I am with people who try to be too smart!"

He expected to see some revelatory confusion on her face, or perhaps surprise, if she did not understand. But her head was still bowed, as if she were not hearing what he said.

"You understand?" he asked impatiently.

"Yes, father."

"I'd like to know what your mother thinks of that," he said, in spite of himself, at once regretting having shown his hand. But after all, she was only a child.

"I don't know, Father."

"You're no fool, Alberte. I've never regretted having pulled you out of an environment ill-suited to you. I have considered that for your good, your reputation, your future marriage, perhaps, it would be preferable for your mother to go away . . . for a time. But now I'm afraid of what will be said—people are so spiteful, you know. It might be insinuated that I'm driving her off, that I haven't done enough for her. I'm beginning to wonder if I wasn't wrong. Although, I repeat, I was thinking only of your good, and. . . ."

"Not done enough?" she exclaimed, with unusual animation.

"Why, what more could you do?"

Again she flushed, shocked at herself for having so frankly spoken her thought. It was her exasperation against Elsa, long contained, that had suddenly exploded.

"And you believe she'll end up by going?"

It was barely a question; rather, it was an affirmation. Yet as he waited for her reply his heart was pounding like that of a hunter stalking his prey.

Alberte had no doubt that Elsa would end up by going away. Had she not heard, six years before, lamentations that would have softened a stone? No, no, no, Elsa would not at any price part from her daughter. And then, the price had gone up. That was all. And Elsa had actually let them take away her beloved daughter, simply to have the pleasure of buying some tawdry dresses and reigning for a few evenings over the Three Storks in an uproar of excitement, and for the pleasure of giving herself the illusion of opulence.

"Naturally, she'll end up by going," she said with some bitterness. She would have liked so much to say just the opposite! "She's not as crazy as she seems to be, mind you! And even. . ."

But old Klaes now knew enough.

"Child, all this is very interesting, but I believe it's time for me to go upstairs. Will you call Suzanne, my dear? We've been talking away, and I forgot my tea. That shows how much interest I take in my daughter!"

He laughed, affecting to jest, but was already impatient for her to leave. He was in a hurry to find himself alone with his triumph.

"Now then, be off with you!"

In the doorway she turned back again, uncertain, not understanding whether or not she had displeased him. But she could read nothing on the expressionless old face. He had half shut his eyes, and the drooping eyelids gave him the look of an animal that has eaten its fill.

Innocent, Alberte no longer interested Klaes, who was too sure of having her at his mercy. No doubt it was the first time she had manifested in a tangible way what she thought of her mother. He had always taken it for granted, however, being convinced from

the very beginning that she could not but feel delighted and relieved in her new existence. And besides, to a certain extent this was true. Alberte, who for years had longed for cleanliness, order, and simplicity, considering carpets and velvet hangings, columns and gilding as the acme of this world's luxury, Alberte, to whom the promised dowry almost represented a fortune, was more than satisfied. But even so, in some obscure part of herself which may be called her sensibility—a part little developed at the beginning—she sometimes confusedly suffered at the gratitude she was obliged to produce to order, as a not quite honest person is obliged to produce a precious object with which he has been entrusted. And that humble and morose little susceptibility of hers was hurt at the occasional ironic smiles and incomprehensible whisperings of those around her, just as in the old days she had been made to suffer by the laughter of the Triangle. Even her body sometimes revolted with all its energy against this careful and constrained way of living; she was not born to live with bowed head. Unaware of it, a blush or a quiver sometimes betrayed the fact, as Philippe had well noted.

But why, then, was Klaes van Baarnheim so engrossed in her? She was there, she came and went at his bidding, as did Maalens, Yves, Suzanne, playing her part of a humble and grateful daughter, just as they played their parts of stupid book-keeper filled with admiration, of perfect secretary, of sly soubrette eventually promoted to the part of mistress, while he, author and spectator, directed and watched simultaneously the geometrical choreography of this ballet.

And was he entirely wrong, in his chosen attitude of simplicity, of horror at psychological complications—what he called “ideas,” with the total disdain of a man who has never handled anything but facts? (Yet what were those figures aligned on squared paper, if not mere “ideas,” since they were not pieces of hard cash or even bank notes?) Was he entirely wrong in considering the members of his household with benevolent disdain as being nothing beyond their apparent functions? For slowly, like an asphyxiating gas paralyzing the nervous centres and destroying certain reflexes that are supposed to be inherently human, slowly, by that in-

voluntary mingling of kindness and tyranny, of sincere, instinctive affection and the brutal craving to possess (those two emotions perfectly mingled and comparable to the emotion felt by outcasts who attach animals to themselves), by an involuntary alternation of lavish gifts and violent threats, Klaes van Baarnheim had managed to reduce to very little the effective life of the people round him. By supplying their needs and by holding them in entire material dependence through the very excess of his good deeds to which he gradually accustomed them, he was impelled in addition to make them confide in him so he could take part in their joys and griefs, appropriating them to his own use. He would have gone so far as not to mind their vices if they had confided them to him, so great was his thirst for possession of any kind. It was easy to understand how, having reached this point, the least resistance was for him more than an obstacle; it was an untruth.

- No doubt that fanaticism came to him from his forebears, those high-living van Baarnheims, that family he had resuscitated, as he was so wont to boast. However, they were the ones, those hard merchants, that appeared in the painting, cold-eyed and stiffly kneeling at the feet of a melancholy Virgin. They or their like, for Klaes had owned for only the past ten years or so that painting which Philippe had daringly attributed to Van Eyck. But Klaes van Baarnheim had never knelt, no matter how briefly, before anyone. Nothing tempered his acquisitive taste, and what drew his eyes most often to that painting which hung facing his bed was the soft sheen of the pearls on the purple of the robes.

Even the hot weather did not succeed in pulling him down. True, he became nervous and impatient, but he remained intact, kept on the alert by a familiar anguish. Had not his whole life been spent in this animal watchfulness, this tension of the mind which calculates, computes the probabilities, making ready to spring, banishing every thought which does not concern the prey?

Chapter Eleven

BORED to death, Mademoiselle Paule had left her post. It was really too hot. The ones who came regularly would find their way to the big room by themselves, and the others. . . . But so few came! At one o'clock in the afternoon there were only four people sitting down at the table in front of their full soup bowls. One of them was an old man in black sateen jacket and felt slippers; another was a withered little man who held his stomach with both hands and had set down an imitation leather portfolio on the floor beside him; the other two were old women, stiff as boards in their respectable poverty. Fifteen minutes later a man with a goitre, formerly employed in the brewery, came to join them. He asked for financial relief, but was not hungry. This latter characteristic finished off Mademoiselle Paule. She went into the kitchen to have a comforting cup of coffee and stood sipping it slowly while listening to the gossip of Jean, whom she pretended to regard with disdain.

While the old women ate hungrily, the dried-up little man, formerly an insurance agent, determinedly started on the story of his life, trying to secure the attention of the man with the goitre, who was shooing away flies, and the old man in the black sateen jacket settled down to read a three-weeks-old newspaper. Klaes van Baarnheim, after his morning coffee, would spend a moment in the big room and would grant, according to his humour, relief of a more or less important nature. A peaceful calm reigned, the sort of calm that prevails in a third-class waiting-room of a railway station. And then, a woman entered. . . .

Elsa had been drinking more than usual. The sarcasms of the Chinese had penetrated her very soul, and that same evening she had gone into the Three Storks where, with more than usual loquacity, she had recounted the story of her hopes and misfortunes. Stimulated by the jovial hoots of her audience, she had gone so far as to take up a collection among the besotted sailors and working-men who had just been paid. The results had been good and next day at dawn she had set out—impelled by an obscure feeling of revenge—to drink up a part of the money in the taverns from which at one time or another she had been evicted. And there she had talked, talked, talked. Klaes van Baarnheim had abandoned her? Not at all! He had just sent her another sum of money for the purchase of clothes, jewels, whatever she liked. Was she going to live with him, then? they asked ironically. And she, carried away by her flood of eloquence, guaranteed that this was the fact. She was to have lunch with him that very day, with her daughter; and with some distinguished people, with. . . . She was capable of naming anyone in the world. They had laughed, but not spitefully. Oh, that Elsa! Always the same! And everyone expected to see her go back to the Three Storks and collapse on her bed as she usually did.

But ill-fortune directed her footsteps towards the shop kept by Suss the old-clothes man who was one of her preferred listeners. She went in. Barely had he sniffed the odour of gin that surrounded Elsa—and which clearly signified that she had some money—than Suss, who had been rather cold to her during the past few weeks, became most cordial. He listened patiently to her tale of the luncheon, which Elsa constantly embroidered with new details, warmly approving her, without the least trace of irony. But for a luncheon of such importance, Elsa must have a splendid dress! He happened to have one there, although he feared it might be a little costly, a gown of such quality and distinction. It had belonged to the wife of a notary—enough said. A soft green silk, trimmed with strass, which would go with the Spanish shawl he had sold her two months before: it would make a glittering “ensemble!” He pulled out the dress, which was too big for Elsa and had been

mended a hundred times—the wife of the notary must have the patience of Penelope—but this year, he said, dresses were being worn very loose.

A child in the backroom of the shop began crying, and he excused himself to go there for a minute. Suss was an excellent grandfather; his dead daughter's child was a pale little boy with thin hair, resembling Suss himself, a boy who had won all the school prizes and read the dictionary from beginning to end. He was suffering at the time from ear-ache. With maternal care, the old man propped up the pale, strangely swollen head on a pillow, and applied to the suffering child's neck a plaster that had been heating on a gas ring.

"I want another book," said the child morosely.

Suss picked up a book of old prints and handed it to him.

"No, I want a new book!" said the sulky little voice.

The old-clothes-man hesitated.

"My ears hurt, Grandpa," whimpered the child, with great presence of mind. "My neck hurts. I hurt all over, Grandpa. I want a new book. There's one I want at the book-seller's on the bridge. . . ."

"What's your book called?"

"The Story of Insects."

"I'll go this afternoon for it," sighed the old man. "But don't fail to keep that muffler round your neck while I'm gone. If you catch cold with this sickness, your ears will fall off!"

And he went back into the shop.

Elsa had already put on the dress, which floated in all directions around her now pitifully thin body.

"How becoming it is! How becoming, and how distinguished! What style! It's exactly what you need. What a shame it is . . . yes, it's a little dear, I really don't see how I could let you have it for less than. . . ."

Elsa left the shop without a penny, for the old-clothes-man knew his job. The cleverness of Suss, the illness of a little boy who wanted books, and whose medicines were costly, prevented her from drinking the two or three additional glasses of wine that

would have finished her off. And away she went across the Triangle looking, in her patched and gaudy dress floating about her, like a grotesque marionette. Near the bridge she met Tugboat-Mary who was strolling nonchalantly towards the water's edge, where she exercised her trade. In hot weather, Mary prospered, and used a handsome orange-red lipstick which would leave flattering traces on the seamen's bodies. Elsa implored her so hard and so well that the street-walker lent her the lipstick, not without an ironical smile, and she smeared her face with it. The sun was beating down. Somewhere a clock struck one. In her fevered brain, befuddled with heat and alcohol, Elsa could hear nothing but the buzzing of her own words, "A luncheon . . . going to his house . . . Bertha is expecting me . . ." For the first time in years she crossed the bridge, followed the opposite quay, turned to the left towards the dock, hesitated another moment in front of the high façade of the van Baarnheim house. But when some children began laughing and jumping around her, hilarious over the way she was rigged out, she went round the house and resolutely entered an open door.

"Monsieur van Baarnheim," she said in a hard voice, in which could be detected fear pushed to the danger point.

"Hasn't come down yet," replied the old ex-employee, raising his nose. His eyes stared for a minute, amazed at the strange figure. Elsa stared back haughtily.

"Poor fool," she said, with a shrug. "He's expecting me. I tell you he's expecting me. And who are all these people, may I ask?"

She could barely hear her own voice, from the depths of the fog that enveloped her. And yet she felt, as a blind person can feel, that vague hostility and incredulity which surrounded her and which must be quickly dispelled at any cost, with words.

"I was invited," she said, speaking too loudly. "Invited to lunch with my daughter Bertha and some notaries, lawyers, uh. . . Everyone knows me in town. I was invited. Perhaps I'm too early. He hasn't come down, he's dressing, and Bertha's dressing, too. But as for me, I'm ready. My dress is new, I bought it this morning. . . ."

She straightened up, with desperate arrogance. "Where am I?"

she asked herself in bewilderment. "What am I doing in this poor looking room? Who are these people? *Who* is expecting me? They're trying to make fun of me, but I'll show them. Bertha exists, he exists. He! Well, then?"

Alberte had said, "She's not as crazy as she seems," and it was true. With mingled terror and pleasure, her mind came back to reality, left her, returned again, like a child leaning over a precipice, enjoying the sensation of dizziness. But where was the gulf? In the truth? But where was the truth?

The old women were whispering. Was she crazy or drunk? Or must it be supposed that the venerable brewer knew this woman of the streets? The man with the goitre looked at her with a certain admiration. He was simple-minded and the green dress seemed wonderful to him, as it did to Elsa. The insurance agent was still holding his stomach with a pained look. The ex-employee tried to bring order.

"Come, sit down here," he said roughly, "and eat something."

Elsa burst out laughing.

"Eat! Why, my good man, if I wanted to eat all the meals I've been invited to, today, I'd be kept busy till night. . . ."

Suddenly on familiar terms, she sat down beside him. He must be made to listen to her. She must talk, talk, must lose herself in an exciting whirlwind of words, and find in the midst of it that other Elsa, the one who was not hungry, the one that did not tremble—she knew not why she was trembling under that grotesque green dress. "You're too kind," she murmured. "If you knew who I am . . . I know, I must look rather untidy today, but. . . . Is my lipstick put on right?" She bounded to the window, looked at her reflection, and came back satisfied, having seen nothing.

"I'll speak to him for you," she said graciously. "For you all. You have something to ask of him, I can see that. Oh, you needn't worry, he always gives help to everyone I recommend."

An envelope with a cheque, that the Three Storks tavern-keeper took in exchange for money. Then, there had been no more money, no more envelopes. Why, why? She broke into loud

laughter. "Since I'm going to live with them I won't need a pension any more," she said aloud.

"A pension?" asked one of the old women, thrusting forward her bird-of-préy profile, cagerly.

"Madeline! Leave her alone," said the other old woman, a creature puffy with an unhealthy and yellowish fat. "Can't you see she's been drinking?"

But the woman called Madeline had nibbled the bait and would not let herself be convinced.

"Are you acquainted with the brewer, Madame?" she asked.

"Am I acquainted with him!" Elsa was elated in the presence of a new audience. "Am I acquainted with him! Well, you'll see, when he catches sight of me, he'll . . . he'll not look at anyone else. He'll say, 'Why, Elsa! Now I understand. I've found you again, at last!' And maybe he'll ask me to live in his house, but I might not accept, on account of my daughter, you see. Is my lipstick. . . ?"

Again she went to the window, checked the state of her hair-do, draped the fringed shawl more closely about her—it had a big grease spot in the middle of the back. The old women exchanged glances. One of them put her hand to her forehead in a significant gesture. The other looked doubtful. The old man in the black satcen jacket shrugged disdainfully; they had interrupted him in his somnolent reading of the newspaper and that was enough to animate him against the intruder, to whom, however, he dared say nothing. The man with the goitre was won over and kept staring at Elsa admiringly with his big blue eyes that were perpetually damp with a tear. Meanwhile, Elsa was leaning towards the two old women. She felt she must absolutely intoxicate herself with words, must lift herself by means of garrulity into that region where she was an unfortunate and persecuted woman, yet esteemed; for she could not bring herself to reconcile her present state of destitution, the hunger that cramped her stomach, the humiliation which she vaguely foreboded, with the image she had forged of herself, the image of a woman who had only to appear in order to arouse devotion, pity, and esteem.

"You were surprised to see me come in by that door, no doubt, dressed as I am, ladies? Well, believe it or not, in a short while, when I go out, you'll not recognize me. But you won't see me, for once he has seen me he'll not let me go away. How many times has he told me, 'Elsa, if ever you're in difficulties, don't hesitate, I'll always be here to help you!'"

With half-shut eyes, she seemed to be savouring her own words.

"Well then, why is it that you've waited?" asked the pallid fat woman, with a shrug.

"I have my dignity, Madame," Elsa murmured, continuing her dream. "When anyone's lived through what I've lived through with him. . . . We met in the park. I was wearing a long, pale pink dress trimmed in velvet flowers, yes, green velvet flowers—they don't make dresses like that nowadays—and he said things to me . . . words . . . words. . . . The crystal chandeliers were lit, and. . . ."

"Chandeliers! In a park!" The old employee exclaimed, unable to refrain from putting in his word.

"Exactly, sir, chandeliers!" she said with desperate courage. "They don't do that nowadays. Chandeliers . . . crystal chandeliers."

A footstep sounded on the other side of the door. She suddenly stopped talking, sat up, and in a weak voice stammered, "My lipstick. . . ."

Klaes van Baarnheim entered the room.

For a moment, confronting this incredible creature, draped like a marionette in multi-coloured rags, he was struck speechless. And she, finding the strength to play her part to the end, murmured, "It's me. It's Elsa." She was ready to faint as she noticed that fundamentally he was still so like what he had been, with his broad shoulders, his imperious little eyes; it was as though he had surged up out of her past, the only living thing in the tissue of lies she had been patiently weaving for so many years.

"What? What's this?" muttered the brewer, still without understanding. He was leaning on Yves' arm, and his surprised face still retained a hint of the wide smile he wore to greet his "customers" as he called them. But as Elsa remained motionless

there, he had to turn his eyes again towards the familiar little face of other days and recognize it. With a mixture of embarrassment and satisfaction (for he did not imagine she had come to him for any reason other than to discuss terms), he exclaimed, "Ah, well, well! Will you kindly go into the next room . . . uh . . . Madame."

Petrified with fear and without a thought in her head, she crossed the threshold and started down the corridor. Klaes, after shutting the door upon the stupefaction of his protégées, followed her, rubbing his hands, his eyes sparkling maliciously. Here she was at last, she had been reduced to it! She had come to implore him, for she was reduced to misery, as could be judged by her incredible clothes, her thin, distraught face. Doubtless it was a little annoying that she had come instead of writing or having someone write. Bah! What difference did it make, as long as he would soon be rid of her?

• "Come this way. . . ."

He introduced her into his study, not without satisfaction. The setting could not but impress her. More vexing was the presence of Mademoiselle Paule and Maalens, who were waiting and who stood up in amazement at the entrance of this strange procession.

"Come," said Klaes impatiently, "let's get down to work at once. Maalens is here—he's my book-keeper, we can get this thing done in five minutes. Sit down, will you." He had waved his hand by way of introduction, but Elsa practically disregarded it as, fascinated, she sat down.

Klaes, still leaning on Yves, walked round the massive desk, behind which he settled himself, with the idea of being more imposing.

"Well now," he said with a joviality destined to fill his collaborators with admiration as they stood there watching the scene in stupefaction, "well now, my dear, tell me quite frankly what you want. All this beating about the bush, these letters, this hanky-panky, were quite useless. I made an offer. You considered it insufficient. Time has passed. We'll not labour the point. I'll not take advantage of the situation. It would have been better if you'd told me frankly, right at the beginning, what you wanted.

"I'd not have refused it, within reasonable limits. I'm not in the habit of haggling over pennies, am I, my dears?" He glanced round him at his collaborators, who eagerly nodded assent. "And I understand quite well how vexatious the idea of moving out of town must be . . . uh. . . . Well, all that should be compensated. Naturally, wherever you choose to go, the same pension will be remitted to you. But if the sum which should permit you to . . . to start a new life . . . seems insufficient to you, I am ready to. . . ."

He stretched out his hand for his pen, made a sign to Maalens, who sprang over and handed him a headed sheet of paper.

"I can have the amount remitted in ready money . . . do you understand, ready money! Whatever you like, for your departure. A woman needs some clothes, eh? So much for the outfit, so much for the suitcase, the ticket. . . . And what do you say to a nice little organized tour? You know, I can see you living like a person of means!"

He gave a hearty laugh at sight of Elsa's prostration, which he mistook for wonderment.

"Come, come, don't let yourself be intimidated. The idea of that letter wasn't bad! The veritable move of a man of business—but I know how to play the game. Name a figure, my child. . . ."

With her eyes rolled up, Mademoiselle Paule asked the heavens to witness her master's angelic patience. Maalens, open mouthed with astonishment, was fluttering about uselessly, getting in the way, pushing forward an unwanted inkwell, stumbling against the brewer's armchair, apparently more embarrassed at Elsa's silence than she was herself. Yves surveyed in silence this wreck of a woman who was Alberte's mother.

Elsa was ruminating. That voice. She heard it say, before, "Don't hesitate, my child." That voice. It was the same, it was surely his. "I'm invited to lunch in his house," she thought, "and he's telling me not to be embarrassed. Where's Bertha? But he's telling me, 'a journey, an organized tour'." For a moment her lost thoughts hovered round an unknown word, and returned to that voice which was now becoming impatient.

"All the same, we mustn't let even the best jokes go on for ever.

I know what you want. In principle, we're agreed. But name a figure. You'll get nothing more, by. . . ."

The same voice. And almost the same words. "Elsa, my child," he had said, "you must realize all the same that Klaes van Baarnheim can't spend his life arguing with you. I never promised you anything, did I? Then what do you want? You want me to marry you? We spent a very pleasant month together, I've taught you things you'd never have known, and now I'm giving you the means to live a decent life." The same words. But was there this voice in the past? Was not this the same scene coming out of the depths of a nightmare? No, no, there was no past, that was the only thing that was true. She had been invited, it was truly Klaes van Baarnheim who was there, and he was introducing her to his guests, was proclaiming that, to do her honour, he would give her whatever she wanted. Swaying, swaying again like the child leaning, leaning over the pavement from a height, fearing and inexplicably desiring the fall. But where was the truth?

Would it be found in Elsa's greed, that had made her stretch out her hands towards that marvellous sum, those three thousand francs from which had sprung a world of phantasies and lies? Or in that absurd little pride that had quivered, momentarily, at the idea of being thus paid, that had resisted (so little, so badly) and had at length yielded? Was it to be found in that rudimentary love which, all the same, she had experienced for a few weeks, parading in the restaurants, decked out in fancy clothes that made Klaes smile, and stupidly filled with pride over being, as she thought, so well loved? Or even in her madness, assiduously kept up, a monument of bad taste laboriously erected over that past hour, to conceal it? Where was the truth? In the benevolent wish that Klaes had—doubtless a rather theoretical wish, but still sincere—for her happiness? In the egotistical irritation of Klaes, who refused to admit that she was not happy in the way he had wanted? In Klaes' unconscious contempt for her, which she had once suddenly felt, twenty years ago, a perhaps justified contempt?

"I don't have time to waste," that voice was saying at present. "Come, let's see, now, since you don't suggest anything. . . ."

What would you say to having the allowance increased by a third, for example, and a good tidy sum of money to be given you on the day of your departure? Not everyone has such an allowance, my dear! It's already quite a pretty sum, you know. Well now, do you accept? A simple 'Yes' . . ."

A simple 'Yes.' She had been asked to say that before. Or was it the same 'Yes'? Had it to do with . . . Bertha existed, that was sure. She existed, and she had gone away. It was not the same voice that proposed money that time. "But I did not accept it!" she told herself frantically. "For I kept Bertha! No. Bertha is here; I sacrificed myself. . . . And the money? The three thousand francs? It wasn't the three thousand francs, that time. . . ."

All at once she felt naked, stripped of her miserable pride, of her elation, that tasteless elation. In the old days, she had so convinced herself and her brilliant circle of friends that she was living a great love, that he adored her, that he was going to marry her. . . . Even then, she had been inclined to make up stories. She had so wanted what she said to be true, and be able to turn the tables on that uncle who was always jeering at her for her lack of good sense. Yes, she had attached herself to Klaes as a kind of revenge, and then suddenly there she was, ridiculously fallen from those sentimental heights, back again in the most miserable reality, which was not even tragic. If only he had had the tact to furnish her with a noble grief, such as the magazine stories described, if only he had asked her to sacrifice herself so he could pursue his work, make a career, or if he had talked of a childhood love that had suddenly reappeared, then Elsa would have found herself in her element. If only he had consulted her, she could have kept her dignity. But how could he even have dreamed of such artifices? He had so conscientiously acted for the best. . . .

"Well, now, are you or are you not going away?"

She felt the impatience, now, of the people around her. A little man was running back and forth excitedly. A woman with the face of a little owl, her lips tight-shut, was approaching her.

"Come, Madame," the woman murmured, "you must realize

that you are surpassing all bounds. Monsieur van Baarnheim has reached the end of his patience."

A pale young man was staring intensely at her. She felt naked, stripped of everything. They were pushing her towards the desk, like an animal towards the slaughter house. In a moment she would leave this strange house with money in her hand, not knowing where to go, infinitely poor. They were all tormenting her. They enjoyed tormenting her. They were telling her lies, they wanted to drive her away. It wasn't true, they hadn't thrown her out of the café, no one had shouted, "Outside, you with your crazy stories!" It wasn't true, she hadn't accepted money from anyone, ever. . . . On the faces surrounding her she looked in vain for a little kindness and attention. She found nothing but impatience, and the exasperated indulgence people show to children.

"Come, sign here. Take this. The pen, Maaleus. You see, she can't hold herself up. Drunk? Oh, she's always been a little crazy."

The truth, the truth. . . Her bewildered brain was in a maze, like an animal that scents death and loses even the impulse to flee. They wanted to drive her away, they. . . . Her wavering eyes were raised towards the man who sat opposite her, and noted, with sudden and fleeting lucidity, the deep wrinkles in his attentive brow, the glimmer of light in the depths of his half-shut yellow eyes. And she discovered what she was looking for. Though half drowned, she encountered the piece of wreckage which would save her and she clung to it with desperate force: that face, the only one that appeared to her clearly, the only one—she felt all at once, like a streak of lightning in darkness—the only one upon which she had any influence, she must hurt it, wound it, destroy it. Overwhelmed by a wave of wickedness, she gave way to that surprising laughter which for some weeks had been in her, independent of thought or reason, the laughter of a deeper instinct which went straight to the mark and wounded with sureness.

"You really want it a lot, don't you? You really want me to go?" she said in a feverish voice. "You imagine it's enough to give me money and that everything else will follow? You imagine it's enough to drive me away with money? Well, you're certainly

wrong about me, all of you, I don't care who you are! I'll stay where I am, and I know what I know. Nothing doing! You can go on talking, but every word is a lie. Ha, you don't know me!"

She was pacing the room, now, her patched dress floating about her, cheeks flushed with excitement, thin brown arms waving, and in the midst of those amazed faces recovering her imaginary royalty, the familiar intoxication of words.

"You can do everything, can't you? All you have to say is 'Take that,' 'Sign that.' But Elsa Damiaen won't let herself be twisted round your little finger. You can offer me a mountain of money, I'll not budge. You can't force me, can you? Suppose I stay on? It's always the same thing. 'Take that, and shut up.' But I'll never shut up! Never!"

Klaes made a motion as if to stop her. But he found it impossible to get out of his chair and Yves, instead of helping him, stood there gaping, and as white as a sheet. Indeed, they were all motionless, as if besides themselves, dominated by that woman who was walking up and down, talking, and who was almost beautiful in her feverish excitement.

"You thought I was only a nobody," she said, addressing the brewer directly this time. "You thought you could command me, didn't you? 'Go back to the country, and don't make a fuss.' But I'll tell them, I'll tell everybody, what you are. . . . You. . . ."

A door opening behind her cut her short. She turned, and saw her daughter. For a minute, with knit brows, she tried to understand, to put her memories together, her anger, the offer made to her. But as the excitement which had sustained her died down, she collapsed into a chair, eyes haggard, almost without consciousness.

Alberte remained stock still in the doorway, her eyes going from her father to her mother to Maalens, who was holding his head in his hands, to Yves, who was very pale. There was a silence. Mademoiselle Paule was the first to recover her poise; she always distinguished herself in catastrophes. Picking up the telephone receiver, she ordered a taxi in a low, hurried voice, then turned to Yves.

"Monsieur Sarfati," she said, "it would perhaps be wise to help Monsieur van Baarnheim upstairs to his room? I'll be able to look after this unfortunate woman. Maalens, will you please give me my handbag? I have some smelling salts. . . . Mademoiselle Alberte, hold up the head of . . . of your mother, for goodness' sake. Can't you see she's going to fall?"

"All the same, I'm able to go upstairs by myself," the old man muttered. But he clutched Yves' arm and went out without adding more. Alberte had come forward, almost without knowing what she was doing. Maalens moved inanely about.

"There's a taxi outside," Suzanne came in to announce. "The cab driver says. . . . Oh!"

With amazement her eyes fell upon the collapsed woman with the powdered and violently rouged face.

"I'll accompany her," said Mademoiselle Paule, with decision. "Mademoiselle Alberte, will you please help me carry her to the cab?"

Silently, supporting Elsa who was all of a sudden completely stunned by her emotions and a resurgence of drunkenness, they went to the door and settled her in the cab beneath the mocking eyes of the driver.

"This will make a nice impression in the neighbourhood!" said Mademoiselle Paule, getting into the cab in her turn. "Oh, well, there's nothing we can do about it! Do you have any objection to my leaving her at Dr. Franck's clinic? She is evidently not in a normal state, and I believe a little rest. . . ."

Alberte nodded assent. The taxi started up.

Chapter Twelve

AT the bottom of the garden, against the hedge, a rather large cabin served as tool and wood shed. In the semi-darkness of the place, Yves was waiting.

"Here I am," she whispered, shutting the door behind her. "I wasn't able to come sooner. Aunt Odilia didn't let me out of her sight."

"What about your father?"

"Still hasn't left his room. I needed to talk to you."

"It's unwise," said Yves stiffly. "It's taking an insane risk. Imagine if Castereau has seen you and tells your father."

"Don't worry. You make off through the skylight and the hedge, and I'll tell him Castereau's crazy."

"And suppose someone comes for wood and hears us through the partition?"

"Wood, in this hot weather!" She stifled a beautiful, deep laugh.

"All the same, it's dangerous. And it was so easy for me to go to your room this evening."

"That's what would have been dangerous," said Alberte roguishly.

But Yves did not countenance this kind of pleasantry and he merely frowned. Recovering her seriousness, she sat down on an overturned wheelbarrow in the disorder of the tool-shed.

"Well? What's happened?" he said, speaking as if with an effort and turning his head aside without looking at her, conscious of the embarrassment it would cost her to reply. "If you hadn't

arrived, I don't know what would have happened there in the study. We were all completely flabbergasted."

"But tell me, what had she said?"

"Oh, it wasn't so much what she said as. . . . She is. . . ." He was about to say "completely crazy," but checked himself. "She's a very excitable person, you know. What she said didn't make much sense. But you should have seen how he looked at her!"

"Of course, he was furious?"

"Furious, yes. Furious, but. . . . He didn't say anything, see. He just looked completely staggered, as if. . . . And he hasn't said anything since, hasn't called you? Do you think that's normal? Oh, I've the feeling that something terrible's happening!"

Already, he was losing his rigid self-control, wringing his slender hands nervously, and there was that imperceptible twitching of a muscle in his set jaw. Alberte gave her habitual shrug, reassured. "Oh come, Yves," she said calmly, "Mamma has just made a scene in his house, he's wild with anger, that's normal. He doesn't call me because he doesn't want to think about it, nothing more."

"For you, everything is always normal," said Yves excitedly. "But let me tell you, something's going on. Why did he want to send her away, in the first place? It'll be your turn afterwards, perhaps. What will become of us? Perhaps he suspects something and I'll lose my job. And if I lose this job, my father. . . ."

He knelt down beside her and laid his head on her knees. Gently, she stroked his fair hair.

"You don't believe me," he said, raising his head, "but this is going to come to a bad end! We'll not get that money. We'll not be able to do anything. And I had something so wonderful in mind. I'd buy a garage at the end of the road leading out of town."

"Yes, yes," she said softly.

He always had wonderful things in mind, that a kind of panic prevented him, at the last moment, from accepting. Would he be surer of himself when Alberte had the promised dowry? He built his plans on that dowry and Alberte always approved them. When the time came, she reflected with tender indulgence, she would know

how to make the necessary decisions. Despite her inexperience, she was sure she'd be able to manage better than he. Perhaps, even, this was a reason for her love; she had seen him so helpless when he began to work for Klaes van Baarnheim. Especially that evening when she had found him slumped down here in this very tool-shed, where she had come to look for an old suitcase to give to one of Mademoiselle Paule's protégés. She had found him sitting on the ground, as now, his head in his hands, a hard expression on his face, struggling in vain against a childish despair.

"Wait a minute," she had whispered to him, and had run to give Mademoiselle Paule the suitcase. When she had returned, he was sitting on a caved-in trunk, having adjusted his tie, composed his countenance, and with such a comically ceremonious expression that she had not been able to keep from laughing. He had been furious at being caught in one of those crises which sometimes overpowered him, much to his shame. But there was nothing for it, he was not responsible. It was a question of health, the doctor had said when consulted; his weak nerves, the shock of financial ruin, the flight of his mother—they were to blame. No, he was not responsible. And yet, a feeling of guilt never left him, it had increased during the past few weeks, beneath the old brewer's perceptive eye which he felt sure saw through him as it dominated him. He could not control himself, at the least slightly curt word he trembled, at the least concession he blushed. "Weakling!" he repeated to himself in despair, and felt that Klaes was able to do what he liked with him. He almost hated Klaes, for his power and assurance and the kind of aggressive vitality that still emanated from the old man. And he had also detested this girl who too much resembled Klaes, this tall, robust, taciturn, and badly dressed girl, who never looked at him and surely despised him. And there she had discovered his secret despair. She had seen him in a state of collapse, had seen his tears, perhaps—for he had shed tears. "Morbid emotionism," the doctor had said. But try as he would to take refuge in the cold and detached diagnosis, his shame was there, even so. Sitting stiffly on the broken trunk, without moving, he had determinedly tried to convince her that she had seen nothing.

But she had laughed. Laughed! She had made fun of him, on top of everything. She would no doubt describe that grotesque scene to her father, how she had found his secretary hiding in the tool-shed, weeping! Then, furiously, as if he would like to beat her, he had seized her in his arms, clasping her tightly, and had kissed her with rage, so that her head banged against the edge of the trunk. He would have possessed her, if she had not finally repulsed him with the strength of her whole body. For a minute they had looked at each other. Then, with what shame and despite what desperate effort, had he burst into tears! And she, too, had been moved to tears, and scarcely knowing what to do or think under that sudden assault and confronted with such despair, she had taken him into her arms, had cradled him, embraced him, for the first time in her life moved to the very depths with pity and tenderness. Perhaps, if those already long years of constraint had not weighed heavily upon Alberte, perhaps if she had occupied herself with the hard work that her vigorous body cried out for, if her whole soul had been less occupied with that perpetual effort of curbing her instincts, she might simply, in her rudimentary psychology, have judged Yves ridiculous. Perhaps, if Yves had not thrown himself upon her with such fury, pity might have sufficed, without the help of kisses, to arouse her profoundly. But, repressed girl that she was, having fought for so long a time her obscure desires, blushing at them, accustomed as she was not to let the world see anything of herself except a surface strangely cold and artificial, the furious kisses, followed by that pitiful outburst of tears had showed her that she had nothing to fear from the man who had so stirred her, and had brought about her sudden undoing. In a moment, she knew tenderness along with desire, and since she was simple and little skilled at self-analysis, she at once concluded that she was in love.

As for Yves, he asked himself no questions. She had wept with him, had pressed him in her arms; that was tenderness. She was Klaes van Baarnheim's daughter: that was security. She was calm, vigorous, taciturn: that was good health, the thing he lacked. From that day on, he had handed over his destiny to her, weary of bearing

its weight alone; she would guide him to a safe harbour. All this confidence did not exclude an imperceptible trace of fond contempt, but he himself was scarcely aware of it. Liberated, he began to construct arabesques around their united future prosperity.

He now reflected aloud, as he gently stroked Alberte's bare ankles and without noticing that it made her tremble, "See here, all the same! As I was helping the old tyrant up to his room, he muttered something, I don't know what, and he wasn't normal, I tell you. And that pension he promised her was princely. Me, I'd go to Greenland if anyone gave me that."

"Not me," said Alberte, still trying to joke. But she had to acknowledge that the sight of her mother there in the study, waving her arms, had dumbfounded her, no less than her father's insistence had done a few days before. What he wanted to do, he had said, was for her sake. But for so many years he had not cared what happened to Elsa!

"Yes, it's upsetting. When you came in," Yves went on, "the way he looked at you! What can we do? What can we do?"

"Why, I'm sure I don't know," she said, ending up by being disturbed at such nervousness. "Why do you want us to do something?"

"For Heaven's sake, because he might hold the foolishness of your mother against you!" exclaimed Yves, with a return of his feverish excitement. "Suppose he suddenly sent you away? Where would you go? But if we can stick it out till you have your dowry. . . ."

At the beginning it was he who had objected to the idea of waiting for Alberte's twenty-fifth birthday and the promised dowry. But she had been able to convince him, with her obstinacy and simplicity. It scarcely bothered her at all to be obliged to hide her plans from the world. She had seen more than one village girl come from the country determined to save over a period of months, sometimes years, the money that was to help purchase the farm or the shop the young couple planned to acquire. Yves had finally fallen in with her way of thinking, as much by reasoning as by that panic that seized him when confronted with the necessity of making

a decision. Rather than risking something to have her immediately, he preferred to wait five years in safety. And gradually he, too, had become accustomed to the heavy atmosphere that prevailed in the house. He had even grown used to the brewer, whom he continued to fear and detest, but with that nuance of attachment that Klaes van Baarnheim always succeeded in inspiring on the part of weak people, by relieving them of all responsibility.

Yves had finally quietened down. With his head on Alberte's knees, he felt unburdened, since he had talked, appeased by the sole warmth of that body close to his, asking nothing more than this drowsy silence. But she felt impelled to speak.

"Do you really think," she said rather hesitantly, "that he will hold it against me? Since he said it was for my sake that he wanted her to go away."

"I don't think anything," said Yves hurriedly. His torment exorcised, he did not care to return to the subject. "I must be nervous. You know, when it's hot I'm always imagining things. Here, feel, my heart is throbbing. . . ."

She put her cool hand on the boy's chest and burst out laughing.

"Your heart is throbbing like mine, yes. You and your tragedies!"

They laughed together for a while, forgetting all wisdom, laughed with all the strength of their liberated youth. For a moment the stifling presence of the house ceased to weigh upon them. Their laughter died out in a kiss.

Chapter Thirteen

MADAME NUÑEZ looked at herself in the mirror with some satisfaction. The dark blue satin dress in which she was encased seemed to her the epitome of tasteful elegance. The admirable pearl necklace, sole relic of her defunct husband's fortune, gleamed on her broad bosom with an iridescent and melancholy light. She caressed it briefly with her plump fingertips. Then she went on with her dressing. A spray of brilliantine on her still black chignon, some powder on her haughty face. . . . It was still the face of a lively middle-aged woman that she saw in the glass, held proudly, as if defiantly. A woman still full of life, a hearty drinker and eater (she had a stomach of iron, much superior to that of poor Klaes, she was sure), and a voracious reader of mystery stories and the more sensational items in the newspapers. A fine catastrophe, a long-drawn-out and well woven account of a murder, preferably sadistic, constituted the delights of Madame Nuñez. Newspaper headlines announcing "All About the Simplon Train Wreck" or "Cruel Calvary of Maimed Man" drew her irresistibly. Her life was so deprived of emotions since she lived with her brother! From time to time, with the heart-pang one feels at the memory of a beloved person, she recalled the summer resorts where she had spent such lovely years with her husband; it was not the defunct Albert Nuñez that she recalled, with his cheerful chubby face and shock of unruly hair, for she had gradually forgotten him, almost completely. What she recalled were the palm trees, the colourful parasols on the beaches, the accommodating page-boys, the casinos. No doubt with a little clever manoeuvring she could

have persuaded her brother to give her a holiday at one of those resort towns she had so loved, and Madame Nuñez did not lack cleverness. But every time she had coaxed and wheedled him into considering the idea, she had suddenly seized the chance of annoying him, of humbling that unbearable pride of his with a word or gesture or look, being unable to resist such an opportunity. More than once she had destroyed, with a smile, months of patient work.

Considering Madame Nuñez' taste for catastrophes, there is no reason to be astounded that she rejoiced over the scandalous scene in her brother's study, about which the entire household was whispering. And that evening, as she made herself ready to accompany him to the Opera, a ceremony renewed twice a month, on Fridays, she was already rejoicing over the spiteful thrusts she intended to give him. With a vivacity surprising in a woman as corpulent as she was, she trotted over to the bedside table to have a glance at a newspaper there. *Mignon* was being played that night. She gave a satisfied smile. Was not *Mignon* a kind of foundling? What better occasion to provide even the least of her appreciative remarks with some poisoned darts? She tried to recall the libretto of *Mignon*. It had been a long time since she had seen it, but. . . . Yes, at such and such a point she could say. . . . Heavenly visions of casinos and palm trees were effaced, once more, by the immediate pleasure of seeing a detested face turn fiery red. One after another, as if preparing to handle instruments of torture, she pulled on her long black gloves, with a little, satisfied smile.

At that very moment, Suzanne knocked at the door and in her pert voice called out, "Madame! Monsieur van Baarnheim says I'm to tell you there's no need to dress. He's taking Mademoiselle Alberte to the Opera tonight!"

"What's this? What dress is this?" said Klaes van Baarnheim sourly.

"It's the dress I wore the other night at dinner, Father," murmured Alberte. She had almost not seen him during the three days that had elapsed since Elsa's irruption, and this sudden decision to take her to the Opera had astounded her. Never had she gone out

with her father. That was a part of the inaccessible things she sometimes dreamed about. Never had he troubled himself about her clothes, either.

"That won't do. That dress is very unbecoming. Haven't you something more dressy?"

"Why no, Father."

"Then what kind of looking-after does your aunt give you? No matter. We'll surely find a shop open, on the way. Let's go, Jean!"

They had got into the car. Breathless from this rapid succession of events, Alberte did not dare say a word. On the Quai des Marchands, a shop was still open. In the window, Alberte saw some evening dresses that looked very splendid to her. Leaning on Jean's arm, the old man made his dignified entrance.

"Oh, sir, we're not selling anything now," said the saleswoman who had hurried up. "We've only stayed open for the customers who are coming to pick up the dresses they ordered. . . ."

"Here is a customer for you," said Klaes, sweeping away the objections with a wave of the hand. "And if dresses have to be ordered, we'll order them."

"But, sir," the saleswoman stammered, nonplussed, "if you would care to come back tomorrow. . . ."

"I must have a dress at once," said Klaes decidedly. "And indeed," he added, consulting his watch, "I give you just fifteen minutes to find it for me. Alberte, accompany the saleswoman, she will choose a dress for you."

The saleswoman sighed resignedly.

"Is it a dinner dress, sir?"

"For the Opera."

"If you will be so kind as to follow me, young lady. . . ."

Alberte found herself alone in the small dressing-room with the fussy little woman.

"He's a very decided person, that gentleman, isn't he?" the saleswoman commented. "Do you want a light or dark colour? We have a very pretty model in garnet red. Or perhaps you'd like one in pale yellow, with a little flounce? I'm going to try the two of them on you, if you'll wait a minute."

She went into the shop, took two dresses from a closet, hesitated.

"As to the price of the dress, sir," she murmured to the brewer who had sat down.

"Show her the most expensive one you have," said Klaes in a loud, clear voice. "But for God's sake, hurry!"

The saleswoman disappeared. From within the dressing-room could be heard snatches of sentences.

"Nö, this would be too short. An alteration . . . Anna! Come here, for an alteration. If you would care to take it away tomorrow, we could arrange it, but not for this evening. . . ."

Finally Alberte appeared, coming towards Klaes. The red velvet dress pulled a little across the breast; she walked without grace, getting entangled in a skirt that was too long, looking self-conscious in her unwarranted splendour. And her hand secretly patted the dress, fascinated by the material which had dazzled her.

"Sir, isn't it a little too . . ." whispered Jean, who had become familiar since the adventure with Ada. But Klaes shrugged.

"Very pretty," he said decidedly. "Very good. How much?"

The saleswoman whispered the price, he drew out his wallet.

"And now, let's be on the way, Jean. To the Opera."

Leaning on the chauffeur's arm, he got back into the car. Alberte followed, blushing, ill at ease, incapable of thinking about anything but the new dress, the marvels of the theatre in which she had never set foot, the lights, the crowd. . . .

They arrived. Trembling with emotion, she got out of the car, awkwardly supporting the weight of the old man who leaned on her arm, while they climbed the stone stairs. It seemed to Alberte that she heard voices greeting her father, but she would have had a hard time to distinguish from where they came. Everything around her was lost in a kind of golden fog.

"This way, sir," said an usherette, effusively. "Your usual box, Monsieur van Baarnheim? And you've not brought your sister tonight?"

"I've brought my daughter," he replied, not without a touch of irony.

"What?" the usherette exclaimed. "This tall young lady your daughter? I didn't know you'd ever been married, sir."

He made no reply. They settled themselves. Alberte, lost in a dream, looked about her at that ugly theatre, at its famous ugliness, that had been consecrated by generations of spectators, seeing in a dream the crumbling polychrome angels on the ceiling, the balconies where half-naked sirens writhed in harmonious volutes, the enormous and elaborately contorted chandelier, the crimson velvets, the gilded sconces with dark red shades, as beribboned as poodles, and the bare shoulders of the wives of notaries, munitions manufacturers, bankers, in the dimness of the boxes. So this was society! A feeling of great veneration swept over her. She could see nothing but that, and missed the sly and belligerent gleam in her father's eyes as he watched her. "Poor child," he was reflecting, "she really needs very little. I'll do something for her. She, at least, will be grateful." He felt a veritable affection for her at foreseeing how easily his plan would unfold. Patiently he waited until she had examined everything down to the tiniest moulding of the ceiling.

"You like this?" he said indulgently.

"Oh, yes, Father."

Try as she would to act with her usual placidity, there could be read in her least gestures and on her face that was flushing with pleasure the intoxication that had filled her from the moment she had put on the new dress.

"Well, me too, I like it!" said the brewer, with forbearance. "And I much prefer being seen with a pretty girl, my daughter, than with your Aunt Odilia who, I must say, is not always in a good humour. Oh, evidently, it's going to cause a little scandal, but what do I care! I've certainly earned the right to do as I please, at my age."

"Scandal?" she murmured uncertainly. But it was not a part of the brewer's intention to show his hand so quickly.

"Look," he said in an off-hand way, "there's the orchestra."

Alberte leaned over to see, again interested. But her father's words remained in her, without being very well understood, and

they buzzed disagreeably in her head, like a memory that pursues you from the depths of a dream and which you try in vain to reject.

"But I tell you he's not alone!" said Simone, exultantly. "Why, just look Philippe!"

Regretfully Philippe tore his eyes away from an attractive woman nearby, raising them towards the box.

"By jove, you're right. And I actually think. . . . Hand me your glasses."

They were seated in the orchestra stalls on the side opposite to Klaes' box.

"It's Alberte," said Philippe. "I'd have wagered it."

"What? But. . . ."

"I'd have wagered it, I tell you. That Elsa affair. . . . Something bad's going to come of it."

That was true. He had thought about it, if not lingeringly. The brewer had been much too obsessed with that Elsa affair, of late. Sometime or other he was destined to consider Alberte as the only possible intermediary. Happily, the child was incapable of turning it to account.

"Yes, it's her, all right!" Simone in her turn stated with acrimony. "And how she's rigged out! Did you notice that dress? Velvet, in this hot weather! I suppose she thought velvet looked rich. And red, to boot. To match the theatre, probably. It's absolutely grotesque. She'll certainly get stared at during the intermission!"

That was evident. Philippe wondered how Klaes, who was not devoid of subtlety, had been capable of such a blunder. The poor girl was going to have people turn their backs on her. How was it that he had not thought of this? And suddenly Philippe almost burst out laughing. Why of course, certainly, he must have thought of it. The old fox! That must even be part of his plan. He would show Alberte how her mother's conduct injured her, and bring her to take some step or other that would annihilate Elsa. In the excitement of the moment he could not keep from sharing this revelation with Simone.

"Even so," she said, without sharing his amusement (for her, the money represented Louissette's dowry, a serious thing) "what I don't understand is why he's using all this strategy to get rid of that poor lunatic who's doing him no harm!"

"Oh, that! If there's one thing Klaes can't stand," said Philippe with a certain didactic satisfaction, "it's the idea that people can have little realms of their own which he can't appropriate. Even if that little realm is no more than a bottle of red wine. If you like, I'll tell you what I really think: Klaes is a kind of idealist. He doesn't realize that. . . ."

The "Hush!" of his indignant neighbours interrupted him. The curtain rose on the second act.

"Well, Alberte?" the brewer queried, after the first act.

She hesitated before replying. That spectacle, for which she was so little prepared, had dazzled her, although she had not followed very well what was happening on the stage.

"It's very nice," she said cautiously. "But aren't the costumes a little shabby?"

The brewer turned aside to smile. Then he leaned on her and stood up.

"Come into the corridor for a while."

Alberte was not long in remarking that she was being stared at.

"Would you like me to introduce you? You see, it's a little ticklish. I don't know. . . . Ah, here's Dr. Franck! Good evening, Doctor. You're seated in the orchestra stalls?"

"As usual, my dear friend," the doctor replied in his beautiful, resonant voice. "Once more I've come to hear one of our good old classics. Ah, *Mignon*! It's certainly old-fashioned, but it's always charming. I hear it again and again, I never tire of it, I'm like those society belles of Balzac who heard their Italian operas a hundred times. And by the way, it's only amongst us, the retarded peoples of the North, that one still finds that Balzacian atmosphere of the opera, isn't it? True, the quality of the spectacles. . . ." His resonant voice died away in an affected cough. "Ah, music!" he

sighed, tossing back his thick silvery hair, a vague smile flitting across his tortured, Beethovenian face. "Music alone can restore serenity to us physicians who, in our work. . . ."

"Do you know my daughter?" asked Klaes van Baarnheim, cutting in rudely.

"I do not have the pleasure," said the doctor curtly.

If Klaes van Baarnheim had set out to be disagreeable to Dr. Franck, he could not have done more than interrupt him in the middle of his sentence. His salutation to Alberte suffered from it. Indeed, Dr. Franck was almost insolent.

"I must go now to join my wife and daughter," he added.

"Shall we be seeing them in the foyer?" the brewer asked with unaccustomed affability.

"Er, no, I don't believe so," the doctor said quickly. "My wife is very fatigued. . . ."

He stammered out a few words and then rapidly slipped away. Just because Klaes van Baarnheim had largely financed the establishment of his now renowned clinic, he needn't presume to force that incredible girl upon him, all the same, a daughter he had not even legally acknowledged, and whose mother was a semi-lunatic and an alcoholic, for good measure. He hurried to warn his wife and daughter.

The foyer was humming with a crowd of people and Klaes and his daughter were barely able to slip through the throng to the buffet. The old man was panting slightly and from time to time his pain returned, a lancinating pain that began in the heart, it seemed to him, and spread to his left shoulder. But the mischievous light still glimmered in his eyes.

"Too bad," he said, after having given his order, "that we weren't able to see the doctor's daughter. A very remarkable young woman. She's a physician, too. . . ."

Alberte flushed slightly.

"You oughtn't to drink beer, Father," she said.

The old man shrugged.

"Bah, Roger says stupid things. I never felt better. Beer's not bad for rheumatism. Come now, empty your glass, we're going

down into the orchestra stalls to speak to the Francks. Philippe and his wife must be there, too."

"I'd rather . . . I think they'd rather. . . ." she murmured.

"Shall we return to our box, is that what you want?" he asked, with surprising comprehension. She nodded assent, all her joy extinguished. Not that she as yet comprehended the crass web of plot and stratagems in which Klaes was gradually enveloping her. But without understanding, an instinct steeled her to receive in silence another blow and to forget it if possible immediately. She was accustomed to these fleeting griefs and overcame them all the more easily because she did not analyze herself. But what surprised and disarmed her more than the humiliation endured was the sudden and heavy-handed solicitude which, under the guise of binding up the wound, widened it still more.

"Oh," the brewer was saying, "I'm sorry. You're offended with me, my poor child. You would have liked to have me be more insistent. I haven't paid much attention to you, it's true. But you'll admit, considering your background, it's a wonder. . . . I mean to say, people could well ask what you might grow up to be. When I saw you were worthy of us, what I wanted was, not so much to separate you from your mother as to remove her to a distance so that she might sink into a kind of oblivion. . . . Many things could have been permitted, then."

Under the purple-veined eyelids, his eyes became narrow slits in which no malice could be read, but the grave, almost respectful attention that a matador may have at the moment of the kill. She frowned, her mind resisting she knew not what, and lowered her obdurate forehead. But Klaes was already confident that she would not hold out for long; she hadn't the strength. And besides, was he not conscious that he was acting as much for her good as for his own peace? He stopped talking. The curtain was rising again, and he was not sorry for it. Those shabbily gaudy costumes, those settings heavy with dust, that artificial and threadbare world on the stage were for Alberte new and exciting, and they were in league with him. The faces which he saw raised now and then in their direction, the whisperings which could be guessed between the

heads leaning together, helped him more than words, and he was already counting on the effect of the solitude that would soon surround them as they left the theatre—that was his surest trump card. Her eyes were now gazing at the stage, but without seeing it. She was putting her thoughts together, reasoning as best she could, her emotions in tumult, but still retaining her ridiculous obstinacy, like a peasant who continues blindly to estimate, in the midst of cataclysms, the possibilities of an impossible harvest. “A kind of oblivion.” Elsa would be forgotten. “Can it be forgotten, then, that I’m her daughter? Is it possible? But what can I do? I could implore her to go away, but that would serve no purpose. Impossible to force her. Then what?” Humiliation, fear, and also greed swept like great gusts of wind around her, she did not give them names but felt as if swayed by them, in every direction. “She’s always been crazy. Crazy and hypocritical. She took the money and sent me away without even asking me what I thought about it. He is good to me. Yes, good. What would Yves say? Supposing she doesn’t want to go away, supposing nothing will persuade her? Will he send me back to her? For that? Then why bring me to the theatre? There’s something else he wants me to do. All that money. Marry Yves. . . . He’ll not let me marry Yves. But once I have the money, I’ll be able. . . .”

The curtain fell, without her having followed a word of what had happened on stage. The music had served only as a distant accompaniment to her tumultuous thoughts.

“You know,” the old brewer said pensively, “what I’d thought of doing to shut all their mouths was to give a kind of reception on your birthday, something that would have proved I really regarded you as my daughter.”

She raised her eyes suddenly and met his. “She’s got it,” Klaes said to himself. “She’s understood. She’s hooked. There only remains to. . . .” He lowered his eyelids to dissimulate the enormous triumph that was welling up in him.

“But,” she said, almost involuntarily, “what prevents it?”

He gave a sigh.

“If your mother had left town, it would have been possible to

pretend, you see, that she'd changed her ways, come into some property, or something. Oh, I'm quite aware of it, these conventions are rather absurd, but they exist, and what can we do! But now, we're faced with the risk of having her appear at any moment, of seeing her repeat that scene of the other day. Oh, I didn't hold it against her, poor woman, she wasn't in a normal condition. But who would accept you, without fearing a little. . . . I don't approve of such people, certainly, and I've sufficiently shown it by taking you into my house, I believe. But I cannot blame them, either."

She gave a sudden start, like a rearing horse, and he realised he had gone too fast.

"I don't ask anything of anyone," she said shortly. "And if. . . ."

"Whoa, there!" he said in the hoarse voice people use when returning horses with care to their stables. "Don't get excited! So you're like me, eh, Alberte? Me, neither! I never asked anything of anyone, and I wouldn't want to drive you to it! No, my girl, what I'd like is simply to have my friends, a little circle of people who are not too bad, after all, be able to know and appreciate you. And this, all the same, is a little hard to bring about, you'll admit, with your mother roving the streets in that strange get-up of hers—to say the least, strange."

"But since she's at the hospital?"

Klaes gave a little sigh of satisfaction. Alberte, without knowing it, had entered the narrow passageway from which she could not escape. All there was to do now was wait, gently, gently, for her to emerge in the arena.

"In the clinic, Alberte! In the clinic. I wouldn't tolerate having people say your mother was in a charity hospital. And Dr. Franck's clinic is the best in town. Some very respectable people are taken there for treatment. She has a private room and is treated admirably well. Besides, I ask no better than to assume the costs of all the treatments she may require. Only, you see . . . your mother's been in the clinic three days now, and she's asking to go back to her work—if you can call 'work' what she does. For my part, I

believe—as Dr. Franck also believes—that with a more extended treatment they could notably improve her state of health, disintoxicate her, turn her into a reasonable human being. . . .”

“But couldn’t the doctor explain this to her?” said Alberte hopefully.

So, it was possible that Elsa might become a normal person again? Suddenly that hope was revealed to her, that deliverance suggested. Suddenly she discovered how important to her was that semi-lunacy of Elsa, about which she had avoided thinking for years. It was already a relief to think that Elsa was a little insane, for this removed from Elsa the degrading suspicion of hypocrisy. And that, more than anything else, was what prevented Alberte from loving her mother. Alberte was advancing, advancing in the path already traced for her by the brewer.

“Unfortunately, my poor girl,” he said with a discouraged sigh, “considering the state she’s in, there’s no way of reasoning with her. What’s needed, you see is. . . . Well, we must have the courage for a few weeks or perhaps months to consider her as irresponsible. And there’s no one but you, my child, who can assume this responsibility.”

Irresponsible. Wasn’t that the word Yves had used, with that wry look on his face which had momentarily hurt her? Irresponsible. In short, that was a sickness, not a disgrace. An irresponsible mother—there was nothing to blush about in that. And if Elsa got well, when she got well, would she not be glad to see her daughter so established in the brewer’s good graces? What a revenge to take on the mocking laughter of the Three Storks waitresses and prostitutes and the children of the Triangle!

“But what must be done?” she asked.

She was arriving. He had been waiting from the beginning of the evening for that question.

“Good Lord, I’m not too sure,” he said, carelessly. “I believe you’ll have to give Dr. Franck some kind of consent, on the day when you come of age—your mother not having any other near relative. Isn’t that so? You’ll have to sign a sort of paper agreeing to let her have medical treatment for as long a time as her condition

requires, and kept in the clinic. Oh, there'll be no difficulty. As a matter of fact, anyone can see, now, that her mind is slightly deranged."

Perhaps he had said that with a little too much vivacity? She was frowning again, apparently reflecting. It was now time to settle the matter, as he was used to doing so successfully at the moment of signing a contract, by saying, "We are agreed that. . ."

"I believe that's really the best thing you can do for her, my dear Alberte," he said in conclusion. "Once more, you are acting for the best, as I expected you would."

"Really?" she said, artlessly. "You really believe so? But the other day. . ."

That was true. The other day he had drawn relief from his daughter's murmured words, "She's not as crazy as she seems to be, mind you." But what could this actually prove? Today, he needed Elsa to be insane. All the same, he was not going to spend hours analyzing the acts and gestures of Elsa, now that he was rid of her. He had wanted her to be a self-seeking woman, in order to get rid of her. Now, he wanted her to be insane, for the same reason. To obtain the result was what was important. He had succeeded. In the old man's superstitious mind, he saw that as a sign. Had he not obscurely convinced himself that his wakeful nights, the maladies that tormented him, came more or less from that inexplicable contrariety, Elsa's existence nearby? Now, he was going to enjoy better health. In the past ten minutes the weight on his chest had already been eased. All those little physical and psychological ills by which he had been beset for several months would ease up, and then disappear. Those memories, those impulses—the affair with Ada now seemed incomprehensible and ridiculous to him—were already appeased. A sign. He experienced the sensation of peace he always felt after concluding a big deal that had obliged him all day to argue while anxiety held him by the throat, and when he had still had to hide his triumph beneath an impassive face while his defeated opponents were taking their leave. Then, what a deliverance to sink into an armchair, the nervous tension over, a subdued elation flooding his body, his whole being heavy and

humming with pleasure like an insect that, swollen with honey, drowns in the sunshine waiting to be crushed underfoot!

When they arrived home, Maalens was still there, sitting in the vestibule, his eyes puffy for want of sleep, but faithfully there, with a paper in his hand.

"Sir, you'd barely left the house when they telephoned from Cologne. It was München's managing director, and I thought I ought to. . . ."

"Well?" roared the old man. "They accept?"

They accepted. He had not been mistaken. It was really a sign. Elsa and München were bound to capitulate at the same time.

"Along the whole line," he muttered, drawing in a deep breath. "I've succeeded along the whole line. . . ."

But upon encountering the uncertain expression in Alberte's eyes, he turned aside and, leaning on the little book-keeper, hurried off to his room, as if to hide in a safe place his inordinate joy.

Chapter Fourteen

IT was eleven o'clock in the morning, and ever since eight o'clock the doorbell had rung almost continuously. Deliveries were being made of flowers, baskets of fruit, silver dishes covered with white napkins which went off to the kitchen, and flowers, flowers, flowers. All the furniture in the dining-room had been rubbed until it shone, and the odour given off by the massive sideboards and the long oak table was not the astringent odour of furniture polish but the finer, wilder, and more pungent perfume of old-fashioned beeswax. Outside, a pitiless sunlight bathed the blue roofs and the sparkling geometry of the canals.

"All the same, Mademoiselle Alberte might lend us a hand," Suzanne complained in an undertone.

"She's in her room, trying on her new dress with her dress-maker," said Jean with a shrug. "And she's chosen her dress with her usual good taste, ha, ha."

For obscure reasons, Jean considered Alberte as his personal enemy. She never responded to his attempts at conversation and even seemed to hold herself aloof as if she felt a certain antipathy for him. A girl of the Triangle playing the fine lady!

"That dress isn't too bad," said Suzanne with impartiality.

Yet she did not like Alberte very much, either. She said that Alberte "didn't know how to laugh." But Suzanne was fair-minded.

"Anyway," said Jean with another shrug, "it's ridiculous to give a dinner party for a girl who barely knows how to hold herself properly at table. And he's invited Dr. Franck and Monsieur Dolfus

and Monsieur Steiner! What do those gentlemen have to do with the birthday of Mademoiselle Alberte Damiaen, I ask you!"

"Well, I adore parties," said Suzanne flatly. "And when it's Klaes van Baarnheim who gives the orders, there's always food left over, we can always manage to. . . . There's the door. Go open it."

Aloné in the big dining-room, she surveyed with satisfaction the table that was already set, the crystals, the shining silver, noting that the crystal wine decanters had a bluish glint in the semi-darkness of half-closed shutters. Yes, she liked parties. And if everything went off well, hadn't the old man promised them all a sizeable tip? She, too, would have a new dress.

"It seems," said Jean disgustedly, returning from the door, "that Monsieur van Baarnheim has hired two women to help. They're here."

"To help? Help do what? As if we couldn't do it all, ourselves. Oh, Gudule's going to have a fit! What in the world's got into him?" This unexpected intervention displeased her highly. Really, the old brewer was going too far. "He seems to think this is the mayor's annual ball," she muttered. "Oh, well, since they're here. . . . They can scrub the entrance, I was going to do it in a while. But it's crazy, if you ask me!"

Apparently that was also the opinion of Mademoiselle Paule and Maalens and Yves Sarfati, as they stood round Klaes in his study, although they all wore expressions of respectful stupefaction. The way the brewer was settling his affairs that morning, and his exuberant good humour justified some slight surprise. In a far corner of the study, Philippe could but observe with amusement the bewildered looks of his uncle's timid staff.

"Why, sir," poor old Maalens babbled, in something more than his usual panic, "you told me yesterday that Sarfati would remit a hundred and fifty thousand francs to me, and today. . . ."

"That's true, sir," said Yves nervously. "All the same, I can't demand two hundred thousand francs for that barley-corn today when only yesterday we asked no more than a hundred and fifty?"

"And I, sir," the thin little voice of Mademoiselle Paule put in, "you mentioned fifty thousand francs for the Foundlings—a splendid charity that, I may say—although they themselves ask only thirty thousand. Don't you think that. . . ."

The brewer's laughter rang out, dominating the tumult.

"This is an example of your timidity! I'm sure your Foundlings won't be sorry to receive a little more than they asked for. If worse comes to worst, they can buy themselves some dolls! As for the barley-corn. . . . Come now, Yves, my boy, just tell us what's to prevent us from changing our price today? What prevents it?"

"Why, sir, you have every right of course," Yves muttered.

"Only, it seemed to me. . . ."

"Seemed to you what? Yes, speak out, I'm in a good humour today. I can listen to all the jackasseries imaginable!"

"Why, it's . . . I believe, for our reputation. . . ."

The brewer's laughter redoubled.

"Our reputation! We're not making our reputation, my boy! I could hope you'll have, at my age, a third or a tenth of the reputation I have!"

"Decidedly, he's in good form this morning," Philippe reflected. "In form, at any rate. I never saw him so gay. And say what he will, the Sarfati lad is right. You don't change prices overnight, on a grain market. He must have lost his head. Probably overjoyed at having the München affair settled."

He turned his eyes upon the old man, sitting behind his desk, and observed his shining eyes, his uncontrolled laughter, the restless movements of the powerful hands. Freed. That was the word that came to Philippe's mind. Klaes seemed as if freed of an immense weight and a little intoxicated at this sudden freedom. Could it be that it was the ridiculous Elsa affair? The attentions with which Alberte had been surrounded for the past week certainly seemed to prove it. "Incredible," he reflected, but not without pleasure. That minimal resistance must have taken on enormous proportions in the brewer's mind for his relief to show as clearly as this. Philippe observed Klaes with the satisfaction of an ethnologist discovering

an unknown people or a ritual hitherto undescribed; all the old man's vexations and illnesses seemed to have crystallized around Elsa. "Poor woman, to have fallen into the clutches of such a man! And probably she's not as crazy as all that. Her only mistake was not to appreciate sufficiently the benefactions of our national tyrant. Ah! You're not happy? To the padded cell with you!"

He almost broke into a laugh, but contained himself. "All the same, it would be immoral for good old Klaes to be cured, thanks to this. But no danger! This is the last flicker. He will die happy, at peace with his conscience, that's something. In this affair, the only one who will get out of it safely is our little Alberte. But that will be something to watch."

Had Yves raised another objection? The voice of Klaes drew Philippe away from his reflections.

"A loss! We're risking taking a loss? What then, sir? Do you imagine I can't afford to take a loss? We'll not be able to sell off the surplus hops? Good, we'll not liquidate the surplus. It will rot? Good, let it rot. I'd rather let it rot than sell it at a ridiculous price at a time when the Americans are trying to find out our secret—without finding it—and will be reduced to importing our beer in another year. If there weren't any risks in business there'd be no pleasure in it. A loss! What a way of reasoning! With your paltry ideas of economy, my poor little Yves, and with your ideas of reputation and the correct thing to do and all the rest of it, do you want to know what you are?"

He was bending towards the secretary, dominating him with all his powerful frame, and yelling, in ferocious glee at knowing him so well. "You're a shopkeeper, my boy! A little shopkeeper! Made to buy three-pennyworth of thread and sell it for five pennies. To the end of your life. Made for the sure profit, the mingy little deal, loans by the week! Less than that, even. An employee with a fixed salary and a monthly deposit in a savings account. Why not a pension? Dying of fear over the possibility of losing your job, your brief-case, your white collar! If I'd been like you, do you know where I'd be now? Behind a stamp window at the Post

Office, and perhaps stealing a stamp now and then to give me some excitement!"

His Olympian laughter filled the study, the stairway, the house, and could be heard even in the kitchen.

"He's laughing!" exclaimed Suzanne indignantly. "He makes us work like mad, and he laughs!"

Once more there was a knocking at the door, this time by an impatient hand.

"Oh," Suzanne moaned, getting unhurriedly to her feet, "this is impossible!"

Again, it was a delivery of flowers, an immense basket of white flowers surrounded by ivy. Simultaneously another delivery-boy, carrying a long reed basket on his head, knocked at the kitchen door. It was the cook's turn to have hysterics.

"What in the world does he expect us to do with all this? He's crazy, crazy!" she groaned, hunting for a corner in the kitchen where this last load could be set down.

Every time there was a dinner party, a similar excitement prevailed in the house. But at least it usually subsided towards lunch-time, to begin again at a great rate towards six in the evening, when the meal was being prepared. But this time, the knocking at the door continued, although it was now two o'clock.

"Now, now, this will be the last," said Suzanne, to soothe the cook who was in a state of collapse. Suzanne was puzzled, though, over what was happening. Even the banknote that the brewer had slipped into her hand as she was serving the coffee had not dispelled a slight feeling of uneasiness that was growing in her. A knocking at the door, and again a knocking. . . . Another delivery of fruit, of superfluous vegetables, of lobsters. A workman from the mill came with a delivery of hares that had been trapped, he said, at Monsieur van Baarnheim's orders. Then, after that, there came a tattered man with some pheasants. And all this piled up in a chaotic way in pyramids that soon crumbled down, loading the table and the sideboards in the kitchen. Bunches of grapes lay on top of grey-blue lobsters, pheasants had been cast down on the edge of the table, and blood was dripping from their pendant heads upon the marble

flagstones of the floor, a blood that was almost black; among the crystal goblets and the dusty bottles gleamed the brown-gold fur of the hares, left there by Gudule in desperation. When at last a cake was brought—an enormous wheel that could have figured advantageously at a banquet for thirty people—she collapsed in tears.

“What’s going on here?” wailed Gudule. “This is too much, too much!”

Suzanne and Jean said nothing. Castereau entered the kitchen.

“What’s this?” he began, then stopped, in open mouthed astonishment. His eyes went from the pheasants to the bottles of golden wine, from the collapsed Gudule to the crumbling pyramids of fruit.

“Why, for heaven’s sake, you’d say that. . . .”

But he could find no words to say. In the silence of the kitchen could be heard another knocking at the door.

“A little marvel,” said Klaes with satisfaction. “It’s a copy of a necklace that belonged to the Princess Eugénie. Twenty-five gold plaques, twenty-five pearls, twenty-five little diamonds. What do you say to it?”

“A marvel, as you say,” said Philippe pensively.

All the same, old Klaes was laying it on a bit thick. That necklace represented an enormous sum of money.

“Well,” said the brewer ironically, “this upsets you a bit? You feel this may make a hole in your patrimony? You’re thinking of measures that must be taken? You could perhaps have me declared incompetent to manage my own affairs? You might appoint a guardian?”

“If we appointed a guardian, Uncle, you’d not be able to recoup in a month the amount of that bagatelle. No, no, I was simply thinking that such a gift for a girl that young. . . .”

Madame Nuñez entered the study.

“You’re crazy, Klaes,” she said with a simple and powerful air of tragedy. “The house is overrun with flowers, we don’t know where to put all the things you’ve ordered. . . .” She stopped, at

sight of the necklace. "Oh, my God! Don't tell me that's for *her!*"

"I don't tell you, since you've guessed it," said Klaes, delighted at her reaction. If anything could contribute still more to his joviality, it was this exhibition of panic by his family. "Now," he added, "since the guests will soon be arriving, would you kindly send Suzanne to help me dress, and my daughter, so I may put this gift in her hand?"

Leaving the room, Madame Nuñez haughtily declared that she refused to aid and abet a foul deed. But on the stairway, she addressed Philippe in a much less grandiloquent tone.

"After all, Philippe, this is insanity. We must do something."

"Don't worry, we'll do something. But in my opinion, this fit of extravagance will come to an end all by itself. Dr. Franck paid a visit to him this morning, didn't he?"

"Yes, but I don't see what. . . ."

"Wait a few days, Aunt Odilia. Once he's got over his first feeling of relief, his interest in Alberte will again be what it has always been, very trifling."

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Madame Nuñez turned an exasperated face towards Philippe.

"But in the name of Heaven, Philippe! His relief, those papers, Dr. Franck. . . . I'd like to know what's going on in this house! And if Klaes persists in hiding it from me. . . ."

"If he hid it only from you, why then, it certainly would be very wrong of him. But he hides it from himself, as well. And that is what will permit him to die happy and for us to. . . ."

"To what? Philippe, you're unendurably enigmatic!"

"To live, I suppose, or at least to live as we know how. . . ."

He was about to add something, but Madame Nuñez left him with a shrug, going towards the kitchen. Philippe went to knock at Alberte's door.

The new dress was spread out on the bed. The shutters, as was customary throughout the house, were half closed. But Alberte

was not making much progress, for she was constantly going to peer through the crack of the shutters, looking down furtively at the Triangle. Every time the door-knocker sounded, it was a blow struck at her heart. "All this for me!" she thought. Dr. Franck had talked very kindly with her. He had said, "Your mother is a sick person, an invalid, nothing more. In a few months she will be quite all right. Allow me to congratulate you again on your wise decision." Everyone was congratulating her. They gave her gifts, increased her dowry (her father had promised it) and this party, those flowers that were piling up in the dining-room, all these preparations betokened by the sounds that reached her ears, were for her. This day was hers, entirely hers. No one would reproach her for anything, and that evening, when she would sit down at table, everyone would see how wrong they'd been to consider her an awkward nuisance and a stranger. She would no longer be constrained or afraid, dragging behind her that old and inexplicable shame. She would talk, she would laugh. "Only an invalid," Dr. Franck had said, "nothing more." Unable to remain in one place, she bounded towards the window that opened out above the green garden and gazed towards the cabin, at the far end of it. If only Yves would have the idea of going there before dinner! She would have liked, in her joy and relief, to tell him how much she regretted their misunderstanding of the previous night. But also, he was so exasperating with his repeated, "I feel something's going to happen."

"You're always afraid of something," she had retorted a little sharply. "And that's why something always does happen to you." And she, too, until today, had always been afraid of something, ashamed of something: afraid that Elsa might make a sudden appearance, or that someone would mention the Triangle, or would ask her who she was. Remorsefully she recalled the bitter look in Yves' eyes as he had gone off, holding himself stiffly, behaving with the propriety he affected when he was hurt. Of course, it wasn't his fault that his parents had been ruined or that his mother had run away. And it wasn't Alberte's fault that Elsa. . . . And yet, how she had suffered over it, without admitting the fact.

But tonight, all that was over. "Only a sick person." It was not Elsa's fault, either. It was no one's fault. There was no shame, no regret, no fear. Everyone was innocent and relieved of a burden. Alberte was twenty-one, she had a new dress, and an irresistible desire to dance. . . .

"Alberte!"

Nor did that voice have power over her now, nor those eyes that were always spying upon her with so much attention, seeming to express. . . . No. She would not think any more about anything. She ran to open the door.

"Your father is asking for you, my dear. Another gift. You surely have no reason to complain about your birthday, do you! And what a lovely day it is for everyone."

Philippe's subtle irony did not hold her. She at once bounded towards the stairs. But his voice halted her when she was a few steps down.

"Alberte, don't run so fast! At least tell me what's the colour of your new dress?"

"White," she said reluctantly.

"White! A touching symbol. Experience offering a new dress to Innocence. A pretty painting could be made of that. But unfortunately, in the paintings, Innocence doesn't wear jewels. Too bad for you, that. Anyway, symbols are out of fashion, aren't they?"

Naturally, he was again chaffing her with these bewildering remarks. She did not go to the trouble of replying, but with a shrug she continued the descent of the stairs.

She did not hurry, though. Already, without being quite aware of it, that pervasive embarrassment had returned to give her walk and bearing a look of constraint.

They entered the dining-room together, Klaes leaning heavily on the robust arm of his daughter, and immediately everyone came forward to congratulate them. Heaven only knew why, they congratulated the father as much as the daughter, an oddity that Alberte noted with astonishment. But she did not dwell upon it, being too

dazzled by that sparkling table, the abundance of flowers, the dark sideboards that had been ferociously rubbed until they had an admirable sheen, and all those words and smiles. Yves remained in a corner, even more detached and polite than ever. From a distance, she gave him a little smile. Men she had seen before but who had never before looked at her, came forward to congratulate her. One of them even said "Bravo!" as he kissed her on both cheeks, which surprised her a little. But she vaguely realized that she was being congratulated not only on her birthday but also, in a certain way, for having deserved such a display of affection on the part of her father. And even that father did not leave her side but remained there, hanging on to her arm, introducing her to everyone (a little as though she were a strange animal) and appearing to be as satisfied as if it had been his own birthday. Everyone, more than once, when calling upon the brewer, had had a glimpse of her. But, no doubt with the idea of putting her at her ease, most of them pretended to be meeting her for the first time. And Alberte, although she realized there was a certain tactfulness in this pretence, could not keep herself from again feeling a little uncomfortable.

At last they sat down to table. Klaes was in radiant good humour as he looked benevolently at everyone. Dr. Franck and his wife, the München firm's manager, Dolfus the banker, Meier the notary, were all there. "Oh," reflected Klaes rapturously, "they wouldn't have dared not to come." At the end of the table Maalens and Mademoiselle Paule were whispering together. Yves, very proper marked the boundary between the employees and the family. The family. Ha, ha, they certainly looked as though they didn't feel like laughing! And yet, whenever his eyes rested on them, they smiled. God, how well he felt! No one, that night, could hold out against him. It was with a kind of gaiety that he had always concluded his best deals. Tomorrow—or why not that very night after the guests had left?—he would get down to that München business. Something formidable could be done with it. The imbecile hadn't taken account of his own possibilities

"And the cake?" he demanded aloud. "Oh, the cake must be brought in now, mustn't it, Alberte? It would look so pretty in the middle of the table. . . ."

She opened her lips to agree, but Suzanne was already exclaiming, "We're going to light it for you, sir. Just a minute. . . ."

They would light it for him! All the same, it was her birthday, not his. She looked round her, expecting to meet someone's eyes upon her. But the serious gentlemen of the party were already deep in discussions no less serious, and their wives were talking among themselves. Dr. Franck made her a protective little sign. Philippe. . . . No, she would not look at him for anything in the world. Roger Nuñez was occupied in suppressing—with clouts over the head—the exuberance of his two little dressed-up sons, whose savage instincts seemed to have been aroused by the word "cake." Next to him, Simone Brenner, thin, elegantly ugly, all finger-nails and pointed smiles, refused to engage conversation with her sister-in-law, Erna, Roger's wife, a fat and badly dressed Dutch woman with a ruddy and happy face.

But no one was paying any attention to Alberte. Even Yves continued to sulk, and from a distance she could see a muscle twitching in his handsome jaw. Again she was overwhelmed by that paralyzing malaise. She dared not begin a conversation, felt awkward and ill at ease in the white dress which was perhaps not as pretty as she had first thought. And the necklace that everyone stared at, and which a short while before had petrified her with admiration, almost embarrassed her now. "Oh, when I make presents!" Klaes had said. And the ladies had exclaimed with admiration. Now, still, from time to time, she felt someone glancing furtively at the necklace, neglecting to look at her face. "Why are they here?" she suddenly wondered. And repeat it as she would and as she had repeated it all day long over the flowers, the dress, the prevailing excitement, "All this is for me," the radiant affirmation gradually, with every passing second, became transformed into an insidious question gnawing at her heart, destroying her momentary happiness and self assurance, her awakened youthful vitality; she could almost hear a sly, rat-like crunching.

" Ah, here it is, at last!" exulted Klaes van Baarnheim.

Forgetting everything, she turned towards the door, through which came a great glimmering of light. Slowly, they were bringing in the birthday cake, the flames of its twenty-one candles already high.

Chapter Fifteen

THAT night, towards two o'clock, Alberte woke up. Through the half open French window overlooking the garden came a continuous whispering sound, a kind of nibbling like that of a mouse in the baseboard, but which could only be produced by hundreds of mice in the garden. She listened intently, got up, and opened the window. It was raining. The hot weather still weighed upon the town, stifling and penetrating, but the relentless rain patiently battled, digging muddy gutters in the gardens, slanting against the window-panes, gnawing away the house-fronts, blowing its foul, tepid breath everywhere, and nibbling here, nibbling there, crunching its fine rodent's teeth into every part of the town.

Alberte went back to bed. "The rain at last," she thought calmly. For a long time everyone had been asking for rain; now there would be months before they would be rid of it. That is, if the cold did not quickly come, bringing snow. Then, everyone would stay indoors. Even in the Triangle there was not one old haymow or store-room or chapel that did not serve as shelter for many poor wretches, who established themselves in their winter quarters as solidly as if they had signed a lease in due form. Winter had been one of Alberte's trials, in her childhood, for then Elsa had the habit of staying in the common room downstairs in front of the fire where she talked endlessly to a circle of half-attentive, half-jeering listeners. And would suddenly shout, "Don't look at me like that, I forbid you to look at me!" to that little daughter of hers who stood there and did not laugh, did not admire, but passed judgment on her with a hard look. What need had Alberte, now,

to think of winter? Or of the Triangle? Or of Elsa? All that was now far in the past, ended. She heaved a long sigh of relief and was surprised at not being asleep. Was it the rain that had wakened her? Or a bell ringing, perhaps? She listened intently for a moment and heard nothing. She felt no nervousness, but simply that vague misgiving of a traveller who thinks he has forgotten something and mechanically goes over in his mind the contents of his luggage. For a moment she searched vaguely among the tasks of the day that lay ahead of her, and found nothing. Motionless in the obscurity of the room, she waited for sleep to come.

Around her, the house was peaceful, compact, and sombre. In the middle of the night it weighed, motionless, with all its importance. The windows were shut, the doors were bolted with ancient heavy bolts loaded with chains and ornamented with bronze hearts or little hands of brass. And the wooden shutters were closed. But always, in every house, there is one window that has been forgotten, through which the night enters. And it was Alberte's window.

Yes, that was surely what she felt and what was keeping her awake: a sensation of heaviness. Images passed in front of her closed eyes, she saw again the opulence of the flowers that still filled the dining-room, the silver dishes, the fragrant fruit in tumbling pyramids at the centre of the table. But all this meant nothing to her; as a thrifty housekeeper she merely regretted such useless waste. Then she evoked the house as she had seen it that day, displayed at its best by the abundance of flowers and lights, saw the velvet hangings of Venetian splendour, the Delft jardinières in which thick-leaved plants grew, the bulging sideboards resembling billowing sails, the Flemish magnificence of the baroque gilded angels, the austere black wood of the Spanish armchairs, the sheen of the paintings and the brasses, of the polished flagstones, even the pompous columned stairway, and the coffered exotic woods that lacked their keys and were never opened. And she could see herself in the bosom of this house, descending the stairway, could see the old man leaning on her, and all those eyes watching her. . . .

The poverty of open doors! Alberte remembered the tavern and

its eternal banging of doors. She remembered its thin walls through which sounds could be heard and through which Elsa could be heard talking, always talking, to a drunken man who was not listening. Soiled dresses, insufficient meals, torn Japanese fans tacked to the wall above her mother's bed, everything that was mediocre, fragile, empty, torn. She recalled the feeling of poverty, of nakedness, that awaited her each morning. Her thought unfolded, calm and monotonous, as if she had not taken part in all that. And the same images of abundance returned to haunt her. . . .

Madame Nuñez had said, "Well, my dear girl, I must say your father has done things well!" Alberte recalled, too, the way Klacs had demanded the cake. And the rather strained attitudes of the guests. Methodically, without haste, she went back to the beginning of the day, to the first blows of the knocker on the big door. To the dress that had been delivered. To her joy. At what precise moment had that joy become impaired?

Had the excessively beautiful necklace which everyone stared at had anything to do with it? No, it was ridiculous to think so. Yet, as with the superabundance of food and the indignation of Yves whom she had passed once in the stairway ("What's going on today, what's got into him? Here he's even putting up the price of barley, now!") and the luxury of the reception, the necklace had aroused in her a feeling of discomfort, almost of displeasure. Something had gone awry.

Tomorrow would not be a day of celebration. Tomorrow she would be able really to rejoice. "We are going to cure your mother, my child," Dr. Franck had cordially said that very morning as he had given her the papers to sign—papers she had not quite understood. "Yes, I assure you," he had said, "troubles of that kind are absolutely curable."

How relieved she had been at those words! So it had a name, that troubled world in which Elsa moved, that semi-lunacy or semi-hypocrisy that Alberte had never been able to disentangle. It was a malady, a simple malady, classed and catalogued among others of its kind. There was no more shame, no more doubt. But what, then, was the reason for the immeasurable contentment

of her father which had blazed forth? Had he, too, doubted and suffered? No matter. Tomorrow. . . .

Already half asleep, her thoughts still wandered. It was Elsa she perceived now, leaving the Three Storks, walking along a road which went off to infinity. . . . The kitchen piled with fruit, the pheasants lying on the table. . . . The heavy hand of Klacs on her arm. . . . And again the road, where it was no longer Elsa, but Alberte herself who walked on and on, having, even in sleep, the confused impression that, at the end of the road, she would find something. . . .

Chapter Sixteen

IT had now been raining for more than three weeks, and the town looked like itself again.

In the streets, in the rooms behind the small leaded window-panes of the old houses, and in the taverns which became filled with damp steam, grumbling recriminations were heard, yet beneath them could be sensed a feeling of relief. That late summer, with its dances, its half-naked beggars on the quays, its trees strung with lanterns, its open air idylls, had disconcerted everyone. Such an unexpectedly relaxed and free life was not the kind that suited Alberte or most of the inhabitants of the town. Doors and windows banged shut with a kind of ostentation, and it was with gloomy joy that the market women declared, "The hotter the summer, the harder the winter."

Mademoiselle Paule no longer left the dark little corridor, for again it was filled with the usual stamping of wet feet. The wind blew on the canals, rumpling them up in ridiculous pleats that tried their best to look like waves. Autumn did the job in double quick time. Everything returned to its preordained order.

A log fire was burning in the little study, where everything was likewise tranquilly in place: the leather armchairs, the bound books on the shelves, the cardboard files stacked on the table, and Klaes van Baarnheim, looking a little sunken, a little hollow-eyed, but apparently in great good humour, was discussing the München-van Baarnheim merger.

"Do you follow me, Philippe? It's clear that if we allege as pretext the cost of the publicity campaign, which we will take care

of entirely, München will be forced to release a few more shares. We will then be majority share-holders and we will stipulate, 'No new beer.' Their formula is beneath contempt, and therefore their brewery will henceforth manufacture solely according to our formula. If need be, we'll change the labels, we'll give them one or two little concessions of the kind."

"But suppose he catches on?" countered Philippe. "For my part, I don't believe he'll be that easy to handle. He'll want to hold on to his majority control. All the same, we must envisage. . . ."

Someone knocked at the door.

"I certainly said I was not to be interrupted," Klaes grumbled. "Come in! Who's there?"

It was Alberte

"What is it, my child?" he said in a gentler voice.

"Excuse me, Father. It's about this evening. Suzanne told me you want. . . ."

"Exactly," said the old brewer sharply. "You are dining with me this evening. You don't like the idea?"

"Why, no, Father. I mean, yes, of course."

"Did they deliver the dress? No? It will be here before five. See to it that you're ready at seven."

"A dress?" she murmured, flushing. "But I have the one I wore on my birthday, Father. . . ."

"A woman never has too many dresses," said Philippe pleasantly.

"And I've always thought you had the makings of an elegant woman, my dear Alberte."

"Will you never finish with this chit-chat?" said Klaes rudely.

"Alberte, I've told you seven o'clock. And now, will you let me work? I don't earn my daily bread with small-talk. And it's not by such talk that I'll be able to turn you into an 'elegant woman.' I can't afford to neglect my business to pay compliments to women! I. . . ."

Little by little his voice had risen to the pitch of anger. But Alberte had disappeared. "Unbelievable. . . . I no longer have the right . . . what I want. . . ." Philippe still heard Klaes muttering. But he was not unaware that his uncle's anger was a blind and

that what it specially concealed was a kind of embarrassment. It was very clear that Klaes would have preferred to keep to himself this surprising decision to take Alberte out for the evening. "So, it's now her turn to be showered with favours," Philippe told himself philosophically. He was not worried about it, for he knew only too well, by experience, how these crazes ended. He almost pitied Alberte, who must be taking all this very seriously. What a come-down, later on, when she came to realize what Klaes wanted of her. But just what did Klaes want of his daughter? He had deformed her enough as it was. She was not clever enough to hold him for long, and he would soon have had enough of her. Poor Alberte! "But if Klaes imagines I'm going to get upset over this," Philippe reflected, "he's jolly well mistaken!" Indeed, perhaps the old fellow's present whim had merely arisen from his harmless desire to annoy his family.

"Well, Uncle?"

Klaes raised his eyes, surprised.

"What? Let's see. What were we saying? It was that child who interrupted us. Oh, yes! She mustn't get it into her head—and you mustn't get it into yours, either—that I'm going to take her out every day. But for some years I've been a stick-in-the-mud. I need to shake myself up a bit. Roger forbids me everything—alcohol, coffee, he'll end up by making me really sick. In reality, I feel quite well. Naturally, now that we have real autumn weather, I have my rheumatism, as I do every year. But what I mostly need is to distract my mind. And all the same, I'm not going to begin taking out Odilia, eh?"

Philippe reflected that only one or two years previously Klaes had not needed to take out Odilia. "And even now," he reflected, "with his reputation for generosity, he'd easily find a girl of easy virtue to take out. There's no reason why he should have to take out his own daughter."

Yes, this was strange. And likewise strange was that false assumption of triviality, as if Klaes were almost excusing himself. So, it was not just to annoy them. Then what? A mere whim? There had been a glimmer in the brewer's yellow eyes that Philippe

had not been able to comprehend. What did it signify? He was vexed over his obtuseness. If Klaes himself began to be complicated!

"And," he said aloud, involuntarily, his curiosity getting the better of him, "you intend to get her used to that kind of life, Uncle?"

"Why not?" said Klaes roughly. "Surely I have the right to do what I like for my daughter. Surely I have the right to think of her happiness? And if I want her to have a little experience of life, want her to go out, be well dressed, be gay?"

Philippe said nothing in reply. To himself he commented, "You didn't worry much about her happiness six years ago. And this will be the first time you've thought about her since . . . since that incredible birthday party." In fact, Klaes had not concerned himself over her at all six months ago. This desire for her happiness was quite recent. The whole thing astounded Philippe, who had thought that once Elsa was placed where she could do no harm, Klaes would cease to take any interest in Alberte. If that were not the case, then the old brewer still had something to get out of her. What could it be? "Klaes begins to be really tremendously interesting!" Philippe reflected.

Perhaps it was because he was a sick man? Despite everything, a man must sense the approach of death. And the horror of death must impel the brewer to cling to the stupidest delusions. "When he's had enough of Alberte, we must find something else for him. Otherwise, he's ripe for committing a folly, bequeathing his entire fortune to the Foundlings, for instance. . . ."

The big hands of the brewer were nervously shuffling the papers stacked on the desk.

"Those are the agreements with München, Uncle."

"What? Oh, yes. Now, as we were saying. . . ."

"We would offer to assume the responsibility of the publicity. . . ."

"Yes. As to their line of soda-water, we'll simply drop that. You have to manufacture a liquor to make soda-water pay. Anyway. I manufacture beer, not lemonade."

"If we had Yves come in, we could dictate to him the. . . ."

"That's right," said Klaes. "There will be a meeting a week from now, and all this must be settled before that."

His voice was as firm and decided as usual. But a flaw existed somewhere, Philippe thought, as he noted the vacant look in his eyes.

Towards evening the rain ceased. The old man had worked through the afternoon, with a kind of rage, giving telephone calls, drawing up the terms of the contract, having another interview with the mill's book-keeper, despite the protests of Philippe, who considered this work completely superfluous. After Philippe took his leave, the brewer kept Yves in the office, and set to work checking the leases of the business premises he owned in the centre of town.

"But, sir," Yves said in amazement, "Maalens could very well take care of this. If you want to evict someone, or even want to sell, I can get out a report for you. It's quite useless. . . ."

"Have you taken it into your head that you know better than I do what's useful or not?" said Klaes heatedly.

Gradually, with the passing hours, he displayed a sort of feverish gaiety, which almost drove Yves out of his mind. The brewer felt the secretary's growing nervousness and it enraged him.

"Yves! No, no, not that file there, for heaven's sake! 'You've been talking for ten minutes about the rights of Taub, and Taub doesn't manage that building. You're losing your head, boy. Anyway, all this is quite beside the point. That building, I intend to sell it in two months. I have a better investment in mind. Or perhaps I'll have the building torn down. Isn't it only ten yards away from there that a big store, a sort of big bazaar, is going to be built?'"

"I can find out, sir."

"Find out, find out! You never know anything. What's the good of you, please tell me? Even that fool of a Henri had something, even Maalens is worth more than you."

Yves paled slightly and said nothing. But his hands, that were collecting the scattered papers, trembled a little.

"Oh, if it wasn't for your father," groaned Klaes, "I'd never

have taken you on here. When it comes to the work you do, I could do it better myself."

With a certain amusement, he stared into the boy's face. For he, too, had detected that slight twitching of the muscle in Yves' jaw, where Alberte had so often set her lips. . . .

"Sir," said Yves, stiffly, "if you wish to do without my services it would be simpler. . . ."

The brewer let out a guffaw, with an abrupt feeling of relief. To see Yves' emotion had unburdened him of that strange weight on his chest. His big hand gripped the thin, nervous arm of the young fellow.

"How sensitive you are, boy! Why, no, I don't want to do without your services! Not that you are so useful, but you're a good lad. Go, now. Run along. You'll get that information for me tomorrow. I'm going out tonight with my daughter."

Yves could not refrain from giving a slight start, which the old brewer perceived.

"What!" he exclaimed. "So you, too, can't bear that poor little Alberte? Why, what's wrong with all of you? Jealousy, eh? Well, you see, I'm very fond of Alberte. But I don't see how that can harm you. You're not my heir, are you?"

"Why, sir," Yves stammered, "you're mistaken, I have no feeling about Mademoiselle Alberte. . . ."

"Good, good. Let's say I'm mistaken. In any case, if by chance," he paused, and not without malice spoke with emphasis, "if by chance you were to say anything about all this to my sister or nephews, see that you don't forget to say that I said I'm *very* fond of Alberte. And I'll bet they'll tell you they are also very fond of her!"

Again his feverishness had disappeared, and along with it that breathless feeling. There were thus some moments, sometimes hours, when he felt suddenly freed, free to breathe and laugh and move. The slight wrenching pain which he always took for a stomach cramp lessened, and even that familiar discomfort in the left arm (his rheumatism) seemed to attenuate. He then gave in to a kind of euphoria, all his cares disappeared, he could not even comprehend

what, a few minutes previously, had tormented him so much. Why, for instance, had he plunged into this work and kept at it all afternoon, this stupid work that any of them could have done for him, as Yves had said?

Philippe had irritated him, with his idiotic surprise. Why, yes, he was taking his daughter out to dine! What was wrong in that? Naturally he would not take her into town. God knew what people would imagine if he did. But a nice restaurant in the country, or by the sea, would surely please her. The poor child, he had not accustomed her to many attentions of this kind. And that morning the idea had come to him that he would like to have a little chat with her. Why not? He rang for Suzanne.

"Is Mademoiselle Alberte ready?"

"Oh, she's been ready for some time, sir. She's waiting in the hall."

"It's as late as that?"

"A quarter past seven, sir."

"Tell Jean to bring up the car, I'm coming."

Well, now! He was going to have a pleasant evening. Painfully, he stood up, leaned on the desk, hesitated to call Suzanne back. Bah! For once, he'd surely manage the stairs all by himself. Gripping the banister, puffing and blowing, laboriously he set himself to the task.

Chapter Seventeen

“TO the Breakers, Jean.”

The chauffeur looked startled. To reach the Breakers, a summer resort on the coast, took the better part of an hour. And the brewer was no longer in the habit of such long trips.

“To the Breakers!” repeated an imperious voice.

And Klaes turned toward Alberte, whose eyes were shining. The Breakers! That represented so many things! Families spending their holidays there, shimmering cars going off in that direction. . . . At the Breakers there was a casino, there were dance halls, striped tents for bathers, high-backed rattan chairs for old ladies, hothouses, luxury hotels. But that was not what Alberte dreamed of nor what made her heave a sigh of content. It was the familiar sound of the word that suddenly, without her quite knowing why, had enchanted her. What it evoked for her was respectability, and that word in its turn evoked the tedium of Klaes van Baarnheim’s study, the musty odour of the old house, the gravity of notaries, the pre-tentiousness of the young girls passing in the street on their way to the Kremmer private school, the needlework class for indigents which was Madame Nuñez’ pet charity, the files of papers handled by Yves, the bound books that she sometimes opened on evenings when everyone had gone out, studiously trying to get absorbed in those tiresome tales of voyages about which she understood nothing. Everything that a girl usually detests in her family—narrow-mindedness, boredom, heavy conversations, the boxwood border of the garden, the prayer book with heavy bronze clasp, the visits

as regimented as those of a princely court, comprised, for Alberte, what she wanted to attain, represented the world in which she would like to win a place.

She sat up very straight on the car cushions, taking care to show herself worthy of the honour her father was doing her by taking her to dine at the Breakers. They were going to a restaurant! She had not been able to keep from blushing with pleasure. What would Yves say if he saw her like this, in the new dress that rustled about her. At last she was going to have a conversation with her father, one of those conversations she had dreamed of having for such a long time, without ever having it. At last he would see what she was, that she knew how to behave, how to talk. At seeing her, would anyone ever have guessed that she was a girl of the Triangle?

But little by little her thoughts wandered, her pride giving way to a simpler and more sensual pleasure, and she enjoyed the gentle movement of the car, the feel of the new dress against her skin. She relaxed, an unconscious smile flickering over her rather full lips, and already her face had lost its acquired look of impassivity and recovered its youthful, if slightly vulgar beauty. For a moment, she leaned out of the window, breathing in the wind, revelling in that cool grey evening. Then she sank back and rested her head against the cushions.

They reached the seaside.

"The sea, Alberte!" said Klaes, a little emphatically, as though he were making her a present of it.

"Mademoiselle Alberte has fallen asleep," said Jean, with more scorn than kindness, snickering into the rear-view mirror.

"What?" said Klaes, and he looked at her. Yes, she was asleep. The hard and anxious expression had suddenly disappeared behind those heavy eyelids she had inherited from him, and it could be seen that she was beautiful. The rather strong jaw bespoke energy, the nose was straight, the cheekbones prominent, the rounded forehead was that of a Flemish Virgin. It was the forehead of that thin, pitiless woman that Klaes had never forgiven: her mother. He had never noticed that Alberte had such a forehead. To be aware of it, he had had to see her with defences down. He made the stupid

reflection that this was the first time he had ever seen her sleeping. She would not have dared let herself go like this before him, awake; even on those sleepless nights, when he had her read to him for long hours, she did not let her head fall on the book. Today, she was sleeping.

Poor child, she was not used to much in the way of luxury. It would be amusing to take her out, to see just what she had in that head of hers. He had never paid much attention to her, and yet, how reasonable she had been in that Elsa affair! She was aware of what she owed him, of course. But he would do even more for her. He would find her the right kind of husband; but not just yet, for he still needed her, that could wait a few years. One of the Meyerheim sons, for example. There was one that already had made a name on the stock-market, and since there had been a bankruptcy in the family, he would not be too difficult to handle. No one could say that Klaes hadn't done all he could for the happiness of his daughter. Upon observing her more closely, he noticed that she did not look very happy. No doubt she was concerned over her mother. He realized that he had even sometimes seen her wearing an anxious look, which she quickly concealed with lowered eyelids and a smile. He was going to fix all that up, he would make it his business to do so. Suddenly he wanted her to open her eyes and marvel at what she saw.

"Alberte! Look at the sea. . . ."

At once she awoke and sat up.

"Have we arrived?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle," said Jean, condescendingly. "We're here. But it's not at all a lively place at this time of year." His tone clearly indicated the lack of pleasure he had taken in bringing them so far, when there were so many first-rate restaurants right in the town.

"You will take us to the Excelsior," said Klaes.

As the car passed slowly along beside the dyke, Alberte eagerly surveyed the deserted beaches on one side of it, where the bathing huts had been toppled over by the wind, and where the black stones of the breakwater showed through the fog every hundred yards

or so. On the other side of the dyke, the fishermen's cottages alternated with little shops that were closed at this hour, where shells and postcards were sold, and rows of villas built close together, perfectly hideous in their fake rustic style, with checked window curtains and gabled roofs, a village for dwarfs, you would say, for almost none of the houses was more than two storeys high. Here and there a street-lamp cast a light on the spectacle of the closed shops and dark windows. As Jean said, it was not the season. But Alberte was none the less satisfied.

"It's lovely," she murmured in awe. "Do a great many people come here, Father?"

"Oh, hundreds," said Klaes with satisfaction.

For his part, he thought the Breakers a frightful place, but his daughter's admiration flattered him all the same.

"And people live in those villas?"

"In those villas and in others, my child. The Breakers—why, it was only a fishing village when an astounding man, Count van Loo, came along to transform it. On the quiet, through some agent or other, he bought up all the countryside. No one suspected a thing, it was a master stroke of business, and suddenly he built those villas, launched a tremendous publicity campaign, and in ten years he'd attracted everyone here. That's what I call a piece of business!"

"Oh, yes," she said with conviction.

He gave a few vigorous pats to the nape of her smooth, strong neck.

"You're a good child. Naturally, the Breakers isn't a fashionable resort."

"Oh, no?"

"No. The fashionable places are Sallendam and Friest, farther on along the coast. This place here is just for middle-class families. Look over there"—he waved towards a building which seemed to be enormous at the far end of the dyke, a kind of vast white barracks with a round tower, its façade ornamented with plaster rosettes, curlicues, and every imaginable architectural superfluity—"that's where families from our town and a lot of other towns go to spend

the week-ends, dancing and playing billiards. You see what kind of place I mean."

"Is that where we're going?" she asked hopefully.

He mistook her tone of voice.

"Oh, no, you need have no fear! Your father's not the kind of person who would take you to a cheap restaurant! When I take you out, it's not with the idea of shaving the costs! Well, Jean, are you hurrying?"

He was rubbing his hands delightedly. If she admired the Breakers, what would she say to the Excelsior, where he was taking her! Oh, she was going to receive a shock! He rejoiced in advance over her surprise.

They had now left behind them the rows of little houses and were passing the dunes which bristled with tufts of coarse grass and broom.

"Yes," smiled Klacs, "it's rather a sinister landscape. But you'll see, you'll see. . . ."

Alberte said nothing. She waited, without impatience, for the moment to come when they would talk seriously. He would perhaps discuss business with her, tell her about his worries. She would manage to show him that she understood. In her turn, she would discuss certain changes that needed to be made in the house. He would see that she knew more about that sort of thing than Madame Nuñez did. And perhaps she would have a chance to slip in a word about Yves? After all, when they had gone to the theatre, he had mentioned increasing her dowry. . . . Her mind was awlirl with calculations.

The Excelsior restaurant was very big and very empty. Only a few couples could be seen, scattered here and there among the mirrors and green plants, eating their dinner beneath the ornately moulded ceiling where monstrous iris hung down like improbable stalactites and even busts of women seemed to bend down over the diners. Between the windows, which were covered with heavy draperies, were statues holding crystal torches. And, moving noiselessly about on the gleaming parquet, a dozen or so waiters were trying their best to look busy. Along the wall some

tables were set in niches of a sort, isolated from each other by ornamented partitions and equipped with benches upholstered in velvet.

"Well, now," said Klaes in a pleased voice, "what do you think of this place, eh? It's something entirely different from that barracks of a casino!" And you're going to have a meal you'll remember!"

The maître d'hôtel came up, an exaggerated smile on his lips.

"Well, Monsieur van Baarnheim! Why, we've not seen you here for a long time! Not many people here tonight, are there? But it's the slack season, and it's not a week-end. No matter, you'll be able to dine without being disturbed. I assure you, sir, you look just the same, you haven't changed in the least. . . ."

"Good, good," Klaes cut in, "tell me what's best on the menu for this young lady who has never been to the Breakers before."

"Never been to the Breakers!" The exaggerated smile was now turned upon Alberte. "Oh, that's really too bad. Now, what would the young lady say to a beautiful *foie gras* in aspic, or to a lobster, to begin with? We have a new chef, Monsieur van Baarnheim, and his *tournedos Rossini* are incomparable. And his *soufflés*, sir!"

"Have you a preference, Alberte?" Klaes asked with a slight smile.

She shook her head.

"Well, then, we'll start with the lobster. After that, bring us what you like, but see to it that it's first rate!"

"Oh, sir! You know the standards of the house!"

From the far end of the room came the confused sound of music.

"Well, Alberte?" said Klaes. "You see I'm known here! There was a time when I came here every week-end, and even sometimes during the week. Come to think of it, when you first arrived I was still coming here. But we grow old, we grow old. . . ."

Alberte felt obliged to say something.

"How big this restaurant is!" she said clumsily.

She was still too intimidated to take pleasure in this meal. And then, those plaster ceilings that seemed so high, despite the crystal chandeliers, that vast room which was three quarters empty, those swift and silent waiters. . . . However, the flowers on the tables, the heavy curtains, the big carpet at the centre of the room were impressive. It must all represent a great deal of money.

"Big? It certainly is. At the height of the season, they handle five hundred people at one sitting—you might say two or three thousand people a day. A gold mine! But since the weather's turned bad, people are more of a mind to go to Fricst, where it's sheltered. In a business such as this, you see. . . ."

It was beginning exactly as she had hoped. She straightened up in her chair and attempted a self-assured look at the waiter, who was passing the bread.

"You see, my girl, what's needed in business is to have a simple idea. I've just had one this afternoon. I'm going to sell my property in the Rue des Juifs, I'm letting the rumour circulate that I'm putting in a big store there. . . ."

He had not seriously considered it. But that evening, with Alberte's admiring eyes upon him, it seemed a sure thing. He would persuade the owner of the Uniprix Bazaar to increase the capitalization, letting him sink some money in the venture. The building, requiring constant repairs, and the income from rents being insignificant, would then be replaced by a paying business. How many times had he not made one or another important decision in the course of a dinner with a captivated woman? Talk about business affairs to a woman, she'll not understand a thing, but if the affair is a good one, she'll listen, ask stupid questions, take an interest in it. But if she yawns, says nothing, and thinks about something else—then drop the deal, for sooner or later, it will turn out bad. That, at least, was Klaes van Baarnheim's way of reasoning and he had a good knowledge of both women and business.

The wine was brought. He poured himself a bumper. Roger had forbidden wine, true, but he felt in such a good humour that night.

"Is there anything special you'd like? If so, your old papa is in a humour to give it to you. Come, now, it's your chance. A young girl always has a longing for something or other, eh?"

"You've already given me so many things these days Father."

"Good, good. If I've given you anything, be sure you've deserved it, my girl. You've been very reasonable. And you surely don't count on your Aunt Odilia or your cousin Philippe to give you presents, do you?"

He gave her a little nudge, his joviality increasing. What else could he ask of the world? His business was thriving, his mind was swarming with ideas, and Roger was nothing but an imbecile to try to make him follow a strict diet. With great appetite, he attacked the lobster.

"What's up now, my girl? Intimidated? True, you're not in the habit of dining out. But we'll get you into it, you'll see, if only to pester the lot of them. . . ."

The wine, the warmth of the room, had made everything look rosy. She seemed younger than usual, and her eyes sparkled. She must enjoy going out in the evenings. He was sorry he hadn't thought of it before. But he had paid so little attention to her in these six years that she had been living with him.

"These lobsters are good. Don't you agree? Here, have a little wine. Yes, it's an excellent wine, you must taste it."

She drank, she ate, while being a little surprised at Klaes' affectionate attitude. The waiters hovered around her, picking up her fallen napkin, filling her glass, passing the dishes. . . . She was a little tipsy. The brewer, completely relaxed, talked garrulously, took a second helping of lobster, found the *tournedos* not to his taste and sent them back to the kitchen, and discovered the pleasure of dazzling this young girl whom he had barely looked at in six years. He experienced, sitting there opposite her, the familiar elation that flooded him, a kind of drunkenness, the suspicious melting of emotions that he mistook for benevolence, during which he was ready to grant the desires of anyone, of the *maître d'hôtel* or the porter, in a desire for ostentation, a need to

exalt himself, which swept away all the old doubts and rancours that lingered in the depths of his heart. It was in this state that he felt really himself, master of the world, exercising omnipotent sway over everyone around him, and overwhelmed with naïve amazement at putting this power only to good use. He contemplated his own goodness, and in imagination displayed it to that relentless mother of his who had refused to yield, to his father who perhaps might have been inclined to admire him. He had shocked all those weaklings with his force, and had kept a horror of their virtuous verbiage, their cramped precepts. But he never felt entirely relieved of these things except when confronting a new face, when suddenly he felt this power to arouse a joy (often a little base), and heard a desire expressed which he could fulfil with a word; it gave him the exciting feeling of appropriating something.

"They were furious, I can tell you, when they saw me taking you out tonight. All of them. Even the Sarfati boy put on a scandalized air. But suppose I wanted to take even my cook out to dinner, what right would Yves Sarfati have to object, I ask you? A good-for-nothing that I keep on out of pure charity! Of good family, true, and his father still has friends on the Municipal Council. Oh, that might be a little useful to me, no telling. And he's a well-meaning young fellow, he worships me. But he's a lad with no future whatsoever. He's afraid of everything, that boy! As scared as a mouse in its hole when it smells a cat. Me, I've never been afraid of anything."

Automatically he tensed his muscles, disregarding the pain in his left arm, and smiled at his daughter.

"Go on, eat some more. Waiter! You will bring the young lady some raspberries and cream. They're hothouse raspberries. These people manage to have them almost the whole year round. Oh, I tell you, when I take you out, I don't take you to a cheap café, do I? What was I saying? Oh, yes. They were all furious. But don't you worry about them, my girl, they'd not be anything without me. Your Aunt Odilia? She puts on a proud front—when she was not yet fifteen she was already bursting with pretentiousness—but she wasn't able even to hang on to the fortune of her husband,

that imbecile Albert Nuñez who dealt in cigars and thought you could make money and live in luxury hotels and gamble in casinos, all at once. It was so distinguished, that kind of life! And I was only a penny-pincher, a common labourer (they wouldn't have dared tell me that, but they thought it). Even my mother was always saying, 'You must be contented with what God has given you, Klaes. You're too greedy, too. . . .' The hypocrites! But they were very glad to have Albert Nuñez marry their daughter. You call that an ideal life? To spend your time in casinos and not give a damn if business is bad? 'You're too hard, Klaes, the life you lead isn't good. . . .' And now, with her distinguished life, she's been very glad to find me to lean on, that aunt of yours! Her son Roger's a fool—not a bad doctor, no, but a fool—and as for Philippe, he's a dabbler in the stock-market. The stock-market has its place, I have an occasional fling there myself, but what I mean is, Philippe takes nothing seriously. Without me behind him, he'd have gone bankrupt long ago. Now, mark you, they're all fond of me, and I'm quite fond of them. But after all, I do what I like, let them attend to their own business. When I sent to fetch you, more than six years ago, what faces they made. Already they were in a flutter over their inheritance! And mark you, they have not got their inheritance yet! I'm still hale and hearty!"

Alberte would have liked to say something, to speak a few well-thought-out sentences, but the violence of this strange tirade wounded her a little, and she could never comprehend that threatening tone her father so often used.

His eyes fell upon her, as if suddenly aware of her presence.

"That must have astonished you, too, didn't it? What a change, eh? You've sometimes thought about it, haven't you? Come, tell me now something of what's in that little head of yours. What did you think when Philippe came to the Triangle to fetch you?"

"Why. . . ." she hesitated in embarrassment. "Why, I don't know. I was so surprised . . . so glad," she hurriedly added, seeing the brewer frown.

"Glad, I should think so!" he commented. "My poor child,

if I have anything in the world to reproach myself for, it's that pitiful childhood you must have had. Did you hold it against me?"

"Why no, Father."

That was true. It had been against Elsa that she had always held a grudge. But without knowing why, she could not bring herself to tell him that. All the same, they hadn't come here to talk about Elsa and the Triangle!

"What a pretty restaurant this is, Father," she said awkwardly. "And how lovely those lamps are!"

That was all she could find to say, in her desire to show him that she knew how to appreciate this luxurious setting. Klaes chuckled, although a little annoyed at being interrupted.

"That?" he said, tapping the spurious Venetian glass lamp, representing a colourful negro holding up a satin shade. "Yes, they have to have this sort of thing to impress the customers. But it's cheap stuff, my girl, nothing but trash. Oh, of course," he added, without intentional spite, returning to his subject, "it's a little better than your cabaret in the Triangle."

She gave a start, hurt to the quick, all her enthusiasm suddenly gone, but he did not notice it, and continued with his trend of thought.

"Tell me. Is that place, the Three Storks, really so dreadful? Philippe told me about it, said it was a very common sort of place, very. . . . A girl of your type must have been shocked by it, all the same. And were you one of the waitresses in the restaurant?"

"I had been, for a year or two," she murmured, put to the torture by this sudden curiosity.

"A girl of thirteen! Your mother would be very much to blame, if she was a normal person, but she's not accountable for her actions. What promiscuity! And of course you sometimes had to repel the advances of men? In such places, usually. . . . Did you share your mother's bedroom?"

"Not always."

She did not understand, no, she really did not understand why

the old man had suddenly taken it into his head to rake up her miserable past and bring to light all that pitiful existence she tried to forget. Something in her revolted against this curiosity, which pounced upon even her most pitiable memories.

"Yes, yes," he was muttering, with a kind of satisfaction, and with all the pleasure of discovery. "You weren't one of those girls who don't know what suffering is. To have to live with that poor creature! And when she agreed to let you come to me, weren't you a little hurt, a little pained? We sometimes like to think that a mother. . . ."

Alberte bit her lips. Just what was he trying to get out of her? What impelled him, all of a sudden, to explore her inmost feelings like this, feelings she did not even confess to herself? What made him want to track down to the very depths of her soul that sick and irresponsible woman—he himself had said it? Oh, and why could he not stop coming back again and again to the subject of Elsa? He was insisting, now, unwilling to comprehend her reticence, trying to make her reply. He had so rejoiced at seeing her happy, had been so glad to think he had won her over by these surroundings, and now there she was again with that look of constraint which he suddenly felt he could no longer tolerate. After all that he had done and intended to do for her, she really hadn't the right to put up that kind of resistance. His mellow humour was on the point of giving way to irritation. Besides, Roger must be fundamentally right: wine was not good for him. Again he felt that constriction in his chest and a spreading pain invading his left shoulder and arm.

"This is just between ourselves, you see!" he said, a little too eagerly, perhaps, and continued to press the subject. "You trust me, you know I'm going to do a great deal for you. You can talk to me freely. She made you very unhappy, didn't she? My poor girl! I see it upsets you just to think about it." (Indeed, at seeing her so hurt, all her pleasure gone, sitting there with bowed head, he felt truly drawn to her and thoroughly enraged at Elsa). "But tell me, she's always been like that, hasn't she? When I knew her, even—I can tell you this now, you're no longer a child—she was

already not very well balanced. See here, the proof of it is that, one day in a restaurant. . . ."

Suddenly he was back again in that past, poking round in it, bringing up for Alberte his proofs: Elsa had never been frank with him. She was even then, in those old days, making up stories about her parents, representing them to be richer than they were.

"You see, though, I wasn't fooled. I could certainly see by her manners. . . . But she wanted to impress me. She's always been like that, you see? Then, another time. . . ."

He continued to harp on this theme, determined to have her yield and agree. And yet, all the same, she had agreed the other day to declare that Elsa was insane. She had signed the papers. Then why was she saying nothing now? And he relentlessly hounded her, with ever more irritation, as he felt her stubborn resistance, trying to find other words, other proofs to convince her. The restaurant was emptying, the maître d'hôtel drew near in a significant way, but Klaes went on talking.

Alberte, with bowed head, remained silent. So it was to talk to her about the Triangle that he had brought her here? To show her what bad taste she had? To talk about Yves in that contemptuous way—"a fine boy"—and to tell her, fifteen minutes later in the same voice, "You're a fine girl, you must recognize. . . ." A little unhinged by the wine, and by the accelerated throbbing of his heart, Klaes was saying no matter what, leaning over towards this young girl as if she had been a woman he had set out to seduce. And what he wanted to obtain from her was no longer her approbation in what concerned Elsa; he had almost forgotten what it was he wanted; it was almost any acquiescence that he desired, any absolution, which would allow him to forget his anguish in the presence of someone who belonged to him.

But Alberte was also slightly intoxicated. Her disillusionment had been too keen. She had a vague feeling of revolt, as a result of her wounded self-esteem and the slur he had made on her love for Yves. Beneath this inquisition, it was not her mind but her whole body that revolted. Roughly, as she would have

repelled an attack, she shook off her father's hands from her shoulders.

"So it was to talk about Mamma that we came here tonight?" she asked, almost without knowing what she was saying.

Klaes looked at her for a minute without comprehending. He had succeeded in working himself up to such a point that it had seemed to him he was winning. His excitement would have dropped of itself, without Alberte's intervention, had she remained silent. He would have parted from her and asked for nothing but repose. Instead of that, she dared set herself against him, she dared. . . . His face fiery red, he summoned the maître d'hôtel with a curt gesture.

"The bill. And be quick, we're in a hurry."

The maître d'hôtel laughed to himself. "He's come a cropper, the poor old gentleman!" he reflected. "Good Lord, she's too young for him, anyone can see. I'll bet she's still not even of age. What a pity."

No sooner had Alberte spoken than she flushed deeply. What was her father going to think? Why hadn't she responded to him? Fundamentally, he was not in the wrong. He might have been able to understand, perhaps. But understand what? She went over in her mind Klaes' words and could not now understand what had suddenly wounded her. He was getting up from table without a word. She gave a last glance at the big empty restaurant, its shining parquets, its crystal chandeliers. She now regretted this elegant place, thought wistfully of her father's promises. Klaes van Baarnheim was walking with long strides towards the car. She followed him, speechless.

"Home, Jean, and be quick."

From the moment the order was given, Jean realized his master was in a bad humour, and it gave him a fiendish joy. "That's just what I thought, she doesn't know how to handle him, the little fool," he reflected. "And me, I'll be on my vacation in a week." He knew how to handle Klaes van Baarnheim, it was easy. In the rear-viewer, he slyly surveyed the old man, who was frowning, taciturn, evidently smouldering with wrath, and Alberte, who was

pretending to sleep. What could have happened at the Excelsior? Would Alberte be thrown out next day, like Henri, like the Hungarian pianist, cast aside like the woman in the Arcades, whom the brewer never mentioned any more? Or was this merely a momentary disfavour which would be succeeded by a new surge of interest? "But no matter," the chauffeur decided, "for she's too stupid to seize an advantage. This thing's finished."

Chapter Eighteen

“**Y**OU'RE very late in arriving, Philippe,” said Roger in an offended tone. “Everyone's here, the family council has assembled in full force.”

They were there, in the Empire dining-room—in imitation walnut, bargain-counter green satin, table-cover with fringes the Nuñez children themselves had painstakingly tied, naughty 18th-century prints (that grades a doctor), with Roger's wife Erna, “young Madame Nuñez,” always turned to the wall after consultation hours, on account of the children. They were all there, sitting around the table: Simone, cool and distant, Madame Nuñez, authoritative, Erna, timid and as much in the way as a too bulky piece of furniture, the children fidgeting beneath Roger's imperious eye, all their faces rendered pale by the feeble lamplight, and greenish by the green satin chairs, as they bent over a not very appetizing cake.

“What silence!” joked Philippe. “And what gravity! You make me think of Rembrandt's ‘Lesson in Anatomy’. But where's the corpse?”

“I would question the good taste of that joke,” the doctor began.

“Now, let's not squabble,” the elder Madame Nuñez cut in.

“A little coffee, Philippe?”

“I've already had coffee, Aunt Odilia.”

“Lucky you,” said Madame Nuñez jovially. “Erna's is so bad!”

They were silent for a moment. Then, as if everyone felt that a little everyday conversation was in order before broaching the subject that had brought them together, some admiring remarks

were made on the children, who were wriggling and squirming restlessly, then Erna tried to start a conversation with Simone, who replied, as usual, ironically. Simone professed to despise her cousin intensely, regarding her as stupid and vulgar, not without reason. Simone, alert and graceful, high-voiced, poised and self-assured, easily triumphed over the stodgy and badly dressed Erna. Philippe noticed this with satisfaction. Simone knew how to wear clothes. And yet, Erna had only to appear, with her big arms, big eyes, and red cheeks, for you to guess at once from a kind of calm plenitude in her movements that she was the happy woman, the beloved woman. No matter how vulgar she was, no matter how much her cantankerous little husband smelt to high heaven of pretentious mediocrity, when you looked at the couple and their chubby offspring, they formed, all the same, a group full of strength, a solid geometry proof against time.

"Well now," said Madame Nuñez, settling her wide hips on her chair as if getting a better seat on a horse, "since we've come together to talk business, let's talk business. We're all agreed that this affair is assuming ridiculous proportions. That girl is going too far, we've got to put a stop to it."

"Easily said," smiled Philippe.

Madame Nuñez shrugged.

"All the same, it's not the first time that our poor Klaes has taken it into his head to behave like a fool! He's had other crazes. . . ."

"That's true," said the doctor. "Perhaps all we have to do is wait. Our uncle is overdoing himself quite a lot, his heart is very fatigued, it may give out at any moment. . . ."

"The poor man!" said Erna with sincerity.

Philippe judged that the moment had come for him to put his word into the debate.

"All this is very nice," he said lightly. "But let's be practical. First of all, are you sure he suspects nothing, Roger?"

The doctor shrugged.

"Nothing. How could he? He has every confidence in me."

"And he hasn't touched by chance on the subject of his medical treatment when talking to Dr. Franck?"

"Even if he had," said Roger in a voice a little louder than need be, "I don't see what Dr. Franck could have found wrong in it. My treatment is perfectly adapted to his case. . . ."

"Don't get excited, son," said Madame Nuñez. "If Dr. Franck had come, I'd have known it through Suzanne. Anyway, he wouldn't have hidden it from me. He takes so little thought of us, poor parasites. . . ."

She gave a hearty laugh, without rancour, already avenged by knowing the name of the disease which, unsuspected by him, was consuming the body of that Hercules, her brother.

"Despite everything," said Philippe, "our plan is no longer adequate."

"I don't see what more I could do."

"My dear Roger, you don't see anything. For you, death is only a question of cells, hormones, and heaven only knows what else. You convince yourself that all you have to do is let the disease run its course, let our good uncle waste slowly away, you count on his not putting up a sudden resistance. That would be too easy, old chap."

The veins in Roger Nuñez temples stood out, he flushed fiery red, and with a cutting gesture that always impressed his patients, he brought the side of his hand down with a thump on the table.

"Philippe, I'll not allow you to pronounce such words. I'm not letting our uncle die; I'm giving him medical treatment. I was asked to say nothing to him about the seriousness of his condition, and I thought it wise to remain silent out of regard for his diseased heart. If he does not follow the regimen I have prescribed, and thus shortens the term of his life, I'm in no way to blame. . . ."

"Roger!" implored his wife.

"Oh, come now, Roger," said Madame Nuñez good humouredly, "remember you are among your own family!"

"In a word," said Philippe, "how much time does he still have ahead of him?"

The physician had recovered his calm. Out of an old habit, he

touched his tie, gave a little cough (let the patient wait, make him anxious, supreme medical precept).

"Oh, come off it, Roger!" Philippe flung out. He knew this operation. "How much time?"

"Why, as you know," said Roger Nuñez, "our uncle has suffered for five years from angina pectoris. I will not weary you with details, but from the evolution of the malady, less rapid than we could have feared (Philippe could not restrain a smile), I think that about four or five months from now, six, perhaps. . . . It is difficult to estimate exactly in this type of thing. . . . A violent emotion would suffice, you see, to bring about a stoppage of the heart. You have noted, as I have, his increasing irritation, his feverishness, his states of depression followed by over-excitement. . . ."

"Those girls of his to that girl! It's pure insanity," exclaimed Madame Nuñez. "I'd maintain it in no matter what court of law."

". . . which indicates a constant progression of the malady," Roger continued. "But it is impossible for me to affirm. . . . In short, estimating with optimism, I'd say he has from six months to a year or two. . . ."

A moment of silence reigned in the dining-room. The children could be heard lapping up their chocolate, and they took advantage of the general inattention to crunch the pieces of cake, one after the other. Philippe surveyed for awhile those tense faces which the lamplight rendered livid. All the same, it was those creatures whose fortune he was going to assure. . . . Roger and his fake brutality, ready for any compromise, Madame Nuñez and her unhealthy fat, her deceitful, matronly good nature. Erna, full of good intentions and stupidity, the chubby children who already showed signs of having the limited intelligence of their father, and Simone, his own wife, affecting unconcern as she looked out of the window but who, as he knew, was ready to fight tooth and nail to save the dowry of Louise.

"Two years!" he said cynically. "That's a long time."

"It's too long," said Madame Nuñez.

In the green shadows, the doctor's face loomed up, convulsed with terror. He shook his head.

"Surely you're not going to ask me to——" he began, then interrupted himself.

The clicking of Erna's knitting needles stopped, then took up again. From the narrow street outside came the sound of voices shouting, and the odours of humanity. The neon signs must be lighting up in the rain, the cafés must be starting to fill with people. But a cold presence had passed through the room, and all eyes had been fastened upon it for a moment. Philippe's laughter brought relief.

"Why no, Roger, we're not going to ask anything of you that you can't do. We know you, for God's sake! It's simply that we must not hide it from ourselves, our uncle is going through a dangerous period. Those ups and downs of his, those weird crazes—especially those crazes. He hasn't much longer to live, you say. But it doesn't take much time to call a notary."

"A notary!" exclaimed Madame Nuñez.

"What? You really think. . . ?" said Simone, whose attitude of unconcern had instantaneously left her.

"A notary?" exclaimed Roger, round-eyed in amazement and anger. "To legitimatize her? He'd dare?"

"Oh, Uncle Klaes won't do that," said Erna confidently.

Madame Nuñez could not repress a burst of shrill laughter.

"Erna, you're too naïve! Philippe's right. There's a danger. All this week that girl has been constantly seeing dressmakers, going out—the chauffeur has to take her now wherever she wants to go—and it seems she's not to do any of the house-keeping from now on, Klaes has hired a woman for those duties. Roger, you must absolutely think up something."

"Oh, yes, dear," said Erna firmly. "If Alberte is as bad as that. . . ."

"Well, tell me what?" the doctor muttered furiously. "What?"

Philippe surveyed them with a smile. Poor monsters, ready for anything, and yet, for all their obvious scheming, so powerless. Ready to kill, and incapable of thinking up the little trick which, without noise or scandal, would deliver them. He held them in the palm of his hand, as spineless as dead devil-fish on the beach, where

they no longer frighten even the children, despite their menacing and grotesque tentacles. Before thinking of taking advantage of their stupidity, he almost pitied them.

"I believe I've thought up a way, a quite innocent way, to get rid of her."

"What, for heaven's sake? Tell us quickly. If there's anything in the world that can be done. . . ."

"Oh, it's child's play. All we have to do is. . . . But since this is my idea, after all, I'd like to come to a complete agreement before talking about this to you. In exchange for my idea, it seems to me only fair that you should give me the house, over and above my normal share of the estate."

"Everything except the house!" exclaimed Madame Nuñez, with a dignified start, thrusting up her big, proud nose. "Drive me out—me?"

"Yes, clearly," said the doctor agitatedly, "the house, that's considerable. Such a house, with its dependencies, a garden that extends to the river, why, my dear Philippe, do you realize what that represents? Several millions!"

"In an estate that includes the van Baarnheim mills, it's a bagatelle, Roger. And you, Aunt Odilia, would you rather be evicted by Alberte?"

For a moment they said nothing, then they all began talking at once.

"To begin with, who's to say your idea's good?"

"If you drop us, you'll ruin yourself!"

"That would be a nice thing to do, to ruin myself out of sheer obstinacy," said Philippe, smiling at them. "Don't forget that I'm doing all this, for God's sake, as a friendly spectator. I've so much less need of that inheritance than you! And wasn't I the one that gave you the idea of leaving Uncle Klaes in the dark about his condition? It was so much more humane! Well, we've gained two years. Do you want to lose the game, lose everything, house and all, out of stupid ingratitude to me?"

Roger and his mother exchanged anxious glances. Without quite seeing through him, they believed Philippe capable of anything.

In all likelihood they had no suspicion of the pleasure it had given him, after having inoculated them with this poison, to watch them, for the past two years, being devoured with unholy desires. He had easily pushed them to the verge of crime; it pleased him to know this, and from time to time he liked to stir up the dregs of those souls, demanding more and more of them, and to see them struggling against an obscure feeling of helplessness.

At last they all yielded, pulling together like a team of horses, their eyes still flashing with rage, trying to assume a look of unconcerned generosity.

"Very well, have it your way. If you want the house that much. But it's excessive, I assure you. And at least, can we count on you in every respect?"

"You may count on me, that's understood. But you will draw up a little paper on this subject, you know, for if ever the will is contested. . . ."

Subdued, they agreed.

"Well, then?"

"Alberte," said Philippe carelessly, "is having a love-affair."

"It's impossible!" shrieked Madame Nuñez.

"You must be mistaken!" said Roger, almost simultaneously.

He smiled at their surprise. He himself had been rather astonished when, in going noiselessly down the hall, he had perceived Alberte exchanging a rapid kiss with the young secretary. Astonished, and even a little indignant. He had always been so sure he saw through her! He would have sworn that her heart was as intact as her body. And there she was in the arms of that young Sarfati fellow! She must be cleverer than he thought, to have fooled him like that. At the same time, he had been amused and a little vexed. Without considering that she was slyly taking possession of the mind of old Klaes. "God knows how, but all the same she'd better be careful, better remember she can't have everything." She was so fond of respectability—but did she like it well enough to turn clever? "It's been known to happen." Oh, that girl Alberte! Trust the innocents! He had been so sure of her good intentions, had thought of her as one of those inoffensive orphan girls that figure in the books of

Madame de Ségur. . . . In the long run, this revelation made her rather attractive. Perhaps he would find in her someone he could talk to. The struggle between them promised to be interesting. . . .

"I can't believe it," said Erna flatly. "A girl as reserved as that!"

"Erna, you can never believe anything," said Madame Nuñez. "As for me, it doesn't surprise me at all. She's a scheming girl and always has been. Blood will tell. But Phil, what keeps you from telling Klaes?"

"What could I tell him?" said Philippe impatiently. "That I caught his incomparable daughter kissing the secretary on the stairway? Very difficult. I'd not surprise you if I told you that Klaes, in taking Alberte out to dine, is obeying, among other motives, the desire to annoy us. It wouldn't be hard to make him believe we were inventing a story out of nothing simply to injure her in his eyes. And what's a kiss? Perhaps I was mistaken, even, perhaps I mistook for an embrace what was only a whispered conversation. Or perhaps she had fallen and he'd caught her."

"That's so," said Erna, with conviction. "Maybe she turned her ankle?"

"Roger," said Madame Nuñez, "will you ask your wife to shut up? I can stand a lot, but that I cannot stand. Well, Philippe, in that case, what are we to do?"

"My dear Aunt Odilia, it's up to you. You have the advantage there. You're forewarned, and she isn't. Watch her carefully and you'll manage to catch her red-handed. I wouldn't be surprised but what the first step. . . ."

"The little hussy!" hissed Madame Nuñez. "I always said it."

"Well, try to prove it, Auntie. There's a job worthy of you, I believe. Watch, stay at your window in the evening, linger on the stairway. . . . But be careful. Don't give the alarm until you can prove something. Otherwise. . . ."

"All this is fine," the doctor interrupted. "But if this is the idea you give us in exchange for a house, I esteem it's not worth the price—more than a million!"

"But did you have the idea? You see! It's an idea that's worth what it will cost you, believe me. And then, I'll not be selfish. I'll

give Alberte a little dowry, so she won't have lost everything on my account."

Madame Nuñez burst out into shrill laughter, overcome with joy.

"A little dowry to Alberte! Oh, Philippe, you're a scream! I'll admit, that without you. . . . A little dowry!"

"Oh, it's nothing to laugh at, Aunt Odilia," said Simone, who had grown rather pale. "Philippe is so generous—he's capable of doing it!"

And as her husband took his leave, she stood up to follow him. Side by side they walked a few minutes in the rain.

"How cold it is," Simone murmured. "When I remember that barely two months ago we were wanting rain. . . . Is all that about Alberte a fact, Philippe?"

"All that? What's a fact, my dear? Her love affair? Old Klaes' present infatuation for her? My plan?"

She turned her head away from him.

"You know very well what I mean. You're interested in that girl."

"Because she's interesting. And she's going to become more so, if I'm not mistaken. Love and money, the poor girl from the Triangle . . . it's material right out of a Cornicille play. I wonder how she's going to pull out of this?"

He really did wonder. That systematic dissatisfaction which she pretended, just to pique the old man, showed a certain skill. Oh, a quite vulgar skill, since all girls of easy virtue get what they want out of a man about the same way. But her method would have succeeded if he, Philippe, had not been there, or if she hadn't stupidly given in too soon to her sensual desires. "If only she had turned to me," he thought, "between us we could have laid hands on that fortune so easily. But she played the wrong card."

He imagined her caught by Madame Nuñez in the arms of young Sarfati, incapable of an intelligent reaction, vanquished beneath the sarcastic eyes of Madame Nuñez, and the victim of a tempestuous revulsion on the part of Klaes. Philippe always came back to that dream he had of having her finally at his mercy. He must

desire her exceedingly to hold such a grudge against her. . . .

They had reached the wide street called Java, now swept by torrents of rain. Impossible, with the car parked only ten yards away, to let Simone go home on foot. The idea filled him with a certain displeasure. His annoyance increased as Simone, shaking her wet garments, settled down beside him in a veritably possessive way.

"When you come to it," he said reflectively, as he turned the key in the starter, "I'm the only one in this family who feels any real sympathy for Alberte."

Chapter Nineteen

STRUNG along the dykes that border the sea-coast are a number of those establishments to which summer brings a thriving trade, filling them with the pungent odour of humanity. They are of every kind, counterfeit Russian, counterfeit Chinese, abounding in Viennese waltzes, Argentine tangos, shaded lamps, embroidered tablecloths, or if in the rustic style, then equally lavish with checked curtains and cuckoo clocks. Autumn is not a propitious season. At that time of year the gaudy gypsy orchestras have left for the city night-clubs and their shoes (much too small) are filled by the more or less able musicians of local fame. At this season, the habitués are, for the most part, spurious married couples who hope to find an illusion of pleasure in the musty odour of mushrooms. However, at this season more drinking goes on than in summer; champagne replaces the lemonade of the respectable summer customers, and the waiters become more friendly, conniving almost fondly with the couples stranded here. While the rain falls steadily outside, a kind of diabolically suspect understanding is established among the tired musicians, the discreet waiters, and the sentimental customers.

Two or three times a week, the long grey limousine deposited Klaes van Baarnheim and his daughter at the doors of one of these establishments. A strange pair they made, and speculation was rife among the waiters as they watched them enter slowly, the old man leaning on the young girl's arm, and choose a table in a far corner of the restaurant. The place was invariably rather dark, with reddish lights, a young man at a nearby table would be

morosely pouring champagne into the low-cut dress of a drunken lady convulsed with laughter, or else the nearest couple would be a pair of lovers no longer young who kissed continuously, lips pressed to lips, uttering a kind of solemn little moan. The dinner Klaes ordered was almost always the same: shrimps, *foie gras*, *canard à l'orange*, for he had a blind faith in these magic words that always elicited cries of ecstasy from women. Alberte would eat with appetite, and while she ate, he would reflect upon the absurdity of his anxieties. What fault, indeed, could he find in her? Well dressed, rosy checked, eating with appetite, she seemed to be happy as she sat there beside him. . . .

Then Klaes would begin to talk, at any rate, he would try to talk, but every least attempt at conversation always turned into an irate monologue. He would start out by mentioning the affairs of the day, his business, observing her closely from the corner of an eye. Was it possible that she mistrusted him? He fancied she did not admire him as much as she should have done. Then he asked her what she had been doing and she replied, in brief sentences. Questions, always questions. And these, little by little, passed from the events of the day to the events of the previous day, and these in turn to those of the past year, after which the questions hovered momentarily on the dangerous brink of the dark subject, then plunged into it. The name of Elsa recurred again and again, whispered by Klaes as if it were a secret. Yes, yes, she was insane, but he would like to know—oh, simply out of curiosity, pure curiosity, and also to estimate the chances of her being soon effectively cured—what stories she might have told. Had she ever talked about him? Had she complained? Had she told how they had first met, had she related all their brief and banal story? He needed to hear it confirmed that their affair had been like all the others he had had with women.

Klaes took it upon himself to tell Alberte the whole story, as if in an effort to convince her of its banality. Forgetting all propriety, yes, it had been Elsa he had accosted on the quay, Elsa whom he had taken to dinner, Elsa whom he had kept at the Hôtel d'Angleterre. It was Elsa who, for several weeks, had been at his bedside, a little

tiresome with her eternal and sentimental chatter. And finally it had been Elsa to whom he had offered that money. And she had taken it—he dwelt on that point—and had been very glad to take it. . . .

Alberte said nothing, her eyes stubbornly upon the table cloth. Why, oh why did he always torment her like this? Was she responsible for her mother's insanity? Or for the annoyances Elsa caused Klaes? Alberte had thought that with Elsa's transfer to the clinic everything would be over. On the contrary, a new kind of torment was beginning. Yet she dared not protest. Every day new presents, and every day the livelier anger in the eyes of her aunt and cousins testified to her growing favour with the old man. Yves himself, so apt to find cause for worry, saw nothing in these outings but what was reassuring.

Again and again these evening excursions were repeated, and always there were more and more of those questions. In the midst of the shaded lamps, obsequious waiters, and embracing couples, they sat at a little table, and Klaes talked. Was she happy? Was there anything she wanted? Why was she silent? As for her, she would not have known how to explain her malaise to him, but those gifts, these outings, in no way did they represent what she had desired. All this money squandered upon her, instead of binding her to him, merely disquieted her. She did not understand what he wanted of her and it is to be doubted that he himself knew very well what he wanted. Always he struck against something hard in her, always he stumbled against Alberte's silence. With a word, it sometimes seemed to him, she could have dispelled this embarrassment he felt between them. With childish smiles he tried to make her say that word, watching and waiting for those moments when she yielded herself to the facile pleasure of the music, the lights, or to the thrill of a new purchase, or to the drowsiness which overwhelmed her early every night, so unused was she to late hours. But always Klaes came up against that same rather fierce incomprehension he felt deep within her, that same silence with eyes suddenly flashing astonishment and then becoming cold and hard—the same expression which had more than once

exasperated Elsa against this taciturn child, so many years before.

Philippe served as confidant to his uncle.

"What bothers me," said Klaes, with a great air of detachment, "is that she isn't happy."

Philippe laughed to himself at such solicitude.

"An unhappy childhood she can't manage to forget," he replied. But he told himself, with an agreeable disturbance, that Alberte was, without knowing it, devilishly clever. Any other girl would have been bowled over by the old brewer's attentions. The game was worth the candle. But Madame Nuñez was a very poor partner in the game. The pleasure she anticipated in catching Alberte by surprise was so evident that she had arrived at this result: neither Yves nor Alberte seemed to have the least interest in each other any more. And the outings continued. The old man was forever summoning Alberte to him, only to send her immediately away, dissatisfied and troubled.

Under her calm appearance, Alberte was no less troubled. She felt at ease only in a world of solid and tangible things. The weighty house, the oppressive tyranny of the old brewer, and even the hatred of Madame Nuñez, were parts of a whole that she could easily comprehend, and where she had found her place. Between her and the van Baarnheim house, there was a kind of pact, the very rigidity of which was reassuring. She had promised her services, given her admiration, hoped for her liberty and a dowry of a fixed amount. Her father had offered another security to that logical mind of hers: sickness and cure are acceptable things, evident and clear, while insanity and drunkenness border on the domains which instinctively Alberte refused to explore. Had he but known it, all he would have had to do was to provide Alberte with this occasion to simplify the world, and she would have seized it; no other assurance was necessary. And she, reassured, would have continued to live in peace, if he had not dragged her into this nocturnal world where objects lose their names, questions their purpose, and where numbers, even, lose their reassuring opacity. Yes, Klaes' error had been great. He was paying for it by struggling against shadows. At the end of every one of these evenings, during which he some-



times felt triumphant but during others was still, with furious obstinacy, recounting his victories to impress her, he was far from suspecting that the reflections he was vainly trying to banish from the drowsy face of Alberte came from him, his talk, his questioning.

Roger put the syringe back into his satchel, threw away the empty tube, and went into the bathroom.

"That'll give you a good sleep," he called out, above the sound of running water. "You're a little tense these days, aren't you!"

"You must get rid of these pains of mine," said Klaes with unjustifiable fury. "They're intolerable! Yesterday I suffered so much I had to stop dictating my letters. And it's the heart, I tell you, it's the heart!"

"You're not going to teach me my profession," said Roger shortly, coming back into the room. "But continue to lie there, please! In ten minutes you'll be quite all right. Oh, that old rheumatism! You have a real grudge against it, haven't you?"

Beneath this brusque joviality that he affected could be discerned a slight nervousness. But Klaes was listening to his heartbeats.

"You really think so?"

"Of course I do! When did those pains start up again? Two or three months ago. During the hot weather you were quite well, weren't you?"

"Yes, perhaps."

"Well, it's clear. Rainy weather's what's bad for you. In your place, I'd go for a nice holiday in the South, and when I came back. . . ."

"When I came back my affairs would be in ruins, yes. Like your father's. It runs in your family to be fond of the South, decidedly. If your father had stayed quietly in this town, my poor dear Roger, you'd not be reduced to doctoring mill-workers. You'd have a good practice or you'd be living on the income from your investments."

"But I do have a practice," said Roger indignantly. "Monsieur Traub, for instance."

"I'm the one that sent Traub to you. He'd better not consult another doctor. My building superintendent, with what he steals from me, can afford to pay for you. See here, you're tiring me. Call Alberte."

"Because she'll not tire you, eh?" said the doctor, with something like irony.

"I'm very fond of that child," the brewer said, waggishly.

"And she's very fond of you, is she?"

"Why not? I've done enough for her, don't you think so?"

"Yes, I do," said Roger, forgetting Philippe's advice and unable to contain himself. "But perhaps she doesn't think so. Don't you see, Uncle Klaes, that she's trying to get round you?"

"Really? How interesting! Does Alberte confide in you?"

The doctor flushed slightly beneath the gaze of the yellow eyes, two barely perceptible gleams of light between half-shut lids. He was too familiar with that gentle tone of Klaes, it usually preceded the lively explosions of anger to which the old man was addicted. He backed away.

"Now, stay there, remain lying down," he said, lowering his eyes, but again putting on a show of importance. "I'll send your daughter to you." He turned on his heels and disappeared.

Klaes almost burst out laughing. He was always amused at the power he exercised with a look, with his trumped up rages, with the impression of violence he managed so well to give without even moving a little finger. Soothed by the hypodermic, he even managed to be amused at the approaching interview he would have with Alberte. This time he was going to clear up everything, with a word, a look. But had he ever realized how deep-seated was his malaise? At every conversation with her, on every evening out with her, which always ended in silence, he considered himself to be simply annoyed, and spent some time cleverly blinding himself to the truth. Roger had said, "Perhaps she doesn't think so." Roger had given him, besides, an excuse to relax. So that was the fear and anxiety he read in their eyes every time they sat down to table. Had he feared something else? Possibly, for how else explain his sudden relief? "Perhaps she doesn't think so." They were dreading

a sudden impulse on his part, the summoning of the notary in haste, Alberte in control of his fortune. She herself, perhaps. . . . Had he not, to win her over, employed vague terms which could have put ideas into her head? Yes, that was it. Her silence was the silence of expectancy. She would have preferred something positive instead of that abundance of useless gifts. This time he almost laughed aloud, in an increasing euphoria. "She's got a good head on her shoulders, that girl," he thought, benevolently, for had he not found the way to smooth things out?

"I'll speak clearly to her. I'll open an account for her in the bank. It might come in handy. Perhaps I'll marry her off? No." He hated the idea of letting go of her like that, and as a matter of fact it had always been understood that she would not leave him before her twenty-fifth birthday. "Marriage can come later. But if she imagines that. . . ." Certainly not, he would not acknowledge her. Not out of sympathy for his heirs—after all, neither his sister nor Roger nor Philippe awakened more affection in him than that daughter who resembled him. But all his tradesman's instinct opposed the gesture. To acknowledge as his daughter a girl from the Triangle quarter would have been as shocking as to pay too high a price for something. Yes, she must be content with what he offered her.

She came in. She avoided looking him in the face, as if, even before he had spoken, she was preparing to defend herself. But he took no offence.

"Sit down, child. We're not going out tonight, you see. Roger has given me a sedative, I'm resting, an old fellow like me is not up to running about in night-clubs, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, I don't mind, Father," she said with a kind of relief. Here in the house she felt safer, as if every piece of furniture, every hanging or drapery had been able to hold her in a stable world, far from that vague and slippery precipice to which he was trying to drag her.

"You're not sorry? Then you're not like other girls, are you! Pretty dresses, outings, all that doesn't mean much to you?" He stopped as Alberte waved a hand in protest. He felt singularly in

control of the situation. "No, no, you don't need to deny it. I'm not annoyed. On the contrary. You're an intelligent girl, you have brains, it's possible to discuss things with you. Business is business, eh? Isn't that what you think?" The words were slipping out with singular facility, almost involuntarily. But the victorious feeling remained: wasn't she now looking at him attentively? "On some points we're in agreement, on others perhaps not. I know what I'm doing, I've never robbed anyone. I told you I'd do more for you than I promised, and it's true. I've not let you down, and won't. You'll have your share and a good enough share to make them all wild. You and I will go to the bank and I'll have an account opened for you. You'll do what you like, then: no more need to do housework, and your aunt won't have any more right to dictate to you. You'll keep me company. That won't be too painful, will it? What do you say to that? Are you satisfied?"

Of course she was satisfied. After all, those incomprehensible outings were a kind of labour. And that work should be paid for was logical. Her functions had changed because there was no longer a scandal to fear. With Elsa restored to health, the world would settle into place around her, a logical world at last, perfect at last. It was like the game of hopscotch she had played in her childhood: the neat squares leading from Inferno to Paradise would have been drawn, the course exactly laid out would have been covered. Her face lit up.

"Well?" said the brewer. "What do you say to that?"

In the blissful well-being that always followed his hypodermics, he now seemed to penetrate to the depths of the young and serious eyes that were raised towards him. At last he was not running up against that wall of silence. She would now thank him, after which he would undress, go to bed for a good sleep, and not wake up till morning.

"It's very kind of you, Father," she said hesitatingly. "I hope I'll be able to . . . to keep you company as you wish. I'll do my best."

"That's good," he said, with the familiar wave of the hand, as if to drive her off, and fully satisfied, for he had interpreted as

humility what was only caution and precision in her. "You may leave me. I'm going to sleep."

In effect, he was weary, but with a good lassitude, gorged with triumph. She stood up, went to the door, hesitated. And he remembered another day when she had looked at him like that, uncertainly, and he had not understood her. He had suspected her, then, of some absurd connivance with that poor creature, Elsa. Stupid of him. Well, he had her under his thumb, now, and she should remain there.

"Tomorrow," said Alberte, as if echoing his thought, "I'll go to the clinic. Perhaps she's already better?"

For a moment she waited in the shadows for an encouragement, a reply. Since there was no response, and judging that her father was asleep, she left him.

Chapter Twenty

IT was a distressing garden, with its tiny patches of dry grass, a denuded tree with drooping branches, the little wire arches aligned beside the stupid paths that wound around in that small space, always returning to the same point, like desolate thoughts, and leading off towards that frightful little plaster shepherdess, old-fashioned and moss-grown, simpering on her rust-stained pedestal.

"Don't be impatient, Mademoiselle Damiaen," said the nurse. "They're dressing her up a little for your visit. She's rather agitated, you understand, on account of being shut up here. It's only normal. But she's very nice, all the same, very nice."

She was talking about Elsa as if about a baby. The nurse was a comfortable looking, fair-complexioned woman, with neatly set permanently waved hair, jingling with a quantity of silver bangles and brooches scattered over her person and relieving the strictness of her uniform. She was well manicured, her short nose was arrogantly tilted, everything about her loudly proclaimed that not only was she not devoid of charm, but that she had a distinguished charm. As she talked, she raised the little finger of her plump right hand, which waved about in tiny gestures.

"But you must sit down, Mademoiselle Damiaen! Ah, you're a little upset? I can well understand. This must be very painful to you. May I sit down beside you?"

She sat down, and went on talking.

"It's not for us to complain, but what trouble we have had with your poor mother! I believe Mademoiselle Franck wants to talk to you about it—she's the doctor's daughter, and she's absolutely

re-mark-a-ble! Yes, your mother's given us trouble, none of the other lady patients here has given as much. Naturally, they're persons of family and education. I've not the least prejudice, on the contrary. And if I may say so, I think you deserve praise. . . ." She hesitated, her little eyes sparkling suddenly with intense curiosity. "She comes from the Triangle, doesn't she? Just imagine, you'll think me very stupid, but I've never been there! To live in this town and not know the Triangle—the very thing foreigners come here to see—isn't that ridiculous? But it's because we have so few hours free in the daytime and at night, of course, it wouldn't be safe. Oh, you wouldn't mind, of course, you must be used to it, but I've heard such awful things!"

She drew still nearer Alberte. Her little finger was raised, and her oily voice dropped to a whisper.

"Tell me, is it true that there's a . . . you know what I mean, a place where the girls are dressed like sailors? And I've heard there's another place where all the girls have deformities? Awful. Is that the truth?"

Alberte had grown pale.

"Mademoiselle," she said ponderously—and for a second she bore an astonishing resemblance to old Klaes—"perhaps when you live in a neighbourhood, you may think it necessary to visit the brothels first thing, but I'm not in the habit of doing so."

The nurse let out a little shriek, as if she had seen a mouse running. Then, the full significance of the words struck her and she slowly flushed a brighter and brighter red. Only a wart on her left cheek remained pale.

"Wh-what?" she stammered. And in her anger, recapturing the tart language of the common people, she uttered a series of exclamations, standing up, with arms akimbo. "Oh, that's going too far! So I'm the one that goes to brothels, am I? That's rough! Here I've been talking for a half hour to this little chit of a barmaid—and everyone knows what that means! And if Klaes van Baarnheim wasn't your father—or so they say, for what's to prove it, eh?—you'd not be allowed to set foot here, you and your lunatic of a mother!"

She was catching her breath to go on, when a tall, pale woman with hair almost white, despite her apparent youth, pushed open the ground-glass door and entered.

"What's all this about, Léaucourt? You're wanted in room 16," she said in a voice demanding unquestioned obedience.

Flushing even a brighter red, the nurse went out, her head bowed.

"You must be Mademoiselle van Baarnheim?" asked the woman with the white hair, motioning Alberte to sit down again.

"I'm called Alberte Damiaen," said Alberte shortly.

The woman smiled.

"That is what I meant to say. Perhaps I was tactless, please excuse me. I'm Hélène Franck. I direct the clinic during my father's absence, and your mother's case particularly interests me. Even if Nurse Léaucourt had not become a little, er, excited, I would have wanted to talk to you. Indeed, I wanted to when your mother first entered here, but your father objected, maintaining that such a meeting might have a bad effect on your nerves, so I had to give up the idea. Please note that I quite understand your feelings. The painful scene which you witnessed must have terribly upset you?"

"What painful scene?" murmured Alberte, not understanding. She had certainly not had a particular desire to pay a visit to her mother; but hadn't Klaes advised her to stay away, telling her it was Dr. Franck's opinion that it would be better not to "over-excite the unfortunate woman"?

"Why, that scene she made when she came to your father's house in that strange get-up, the scene that made you decide, very wisely I may say, to have her placed under medical care."

Alberte said nothing. Slowly her mind registered these surprising words and reflected upon them. But she was too well practised in self-restraint to betray anything of her surprise. Hélène Franck, confronted by Alberte's stubborn silence, thought it useless to pursue the subject.

"No matter," she said, "I'm very glad to see you today, for I have some things I want to discuss with you. I will confess, your mother poses a slight problem for us. Oh, it's quite easy to solve. Your father is very insistent that we take care of her here and,

naturally it goes without saying, we do not contemplate letting her. . . ." She paused, carefully weighing her words. "We do not consider letting her sink back into the kind of life which was unfit for her. Only, you see, this is not a hospital. Rather, it's a kind of rest home, a little club where patients in need of dis-intoxication, in a fatigued condition but in possession of all their faculties, adjusted to social life, come for a rest-cure. Our patients are perfectly free to associate in groups, to come and go, even to run an errand in town (of course, with a nurse) if their state of health permits. Well, now, your mother, whom we welcomed with joy since Monsieur van Baarnheim requested it, is more difficult." She paused in embarrassment and consulted the little notebook she was holding in one hand. "Madame Damiaen has behind her," she went on in a voice that was again precise and cold, "many years of pronounced alcoholism. The intoxication is profound, and has brought about syndromes of a mental order which might be assimilated to a kind of *idée fixe*, an obsession. You yourself have, I imagine, had occasion to note the crises of almost somnambulistic volubility, during which Madame Damiaen recalls a luxurious past that she no doubt never knew?"

Alberte flushed deeply. Then she would always have to discuss the case of her mother, whether with the idlers at the Three Storks, or with her father, or with this terrible, calm, cold woman? Would she always have to bear this shame? And did that green notebook labelled "Observations" circulate throughout the clinic? In it everyone would read about Elsa's stupidities, then analyze and dissect them. They circulated in the clinic as they had circulated in the Triangle. Was it then worth the trouble. . . ?

"In the course of these crises, Madame Damiaen recalls, evidently in a slightly, er, transposed version, how she made the acquaintance of your father, either at the Ritz in Madrid, or in a park, or somewhere else—a series of phantasies which she owes in part to her reading, I suppose, but which have a most objectionable effect upon my patients. I may say that several have been so disturbed that they have asked me if the gravity of their own condition had not been concealed from them by us. You will easily understand how,

therefore, the presence of your mother in this section is no longer possible."

"You're going to send her back home?" Alberte asked with some anxiety. She did not quite understand the slightly disdainful smile of Hélène Franck that greeted her words.

"Oh, no, don't worry. And don't worry your father. It's just that, with your permission, we are going to transfer her to another department. A simple disintoxication is futile, but I believe a suitable psychoanalytic treatment will give, in time, some good results."

"How much time?" asked Alberte mechanically.

The lady-doctor raised her unfeeling eyes.

"Why, of what importance to you is the question of time? According to your father——"

"According to my father?"

This time Alberte was unable to hide a slight perturbation, for again she felt that barely perceptible anxiety and embarrassment that had grazed her more than once in the course of those interminable evenings with the old brewer.

"Don't worry, child," said Hélène Franck in a gentler voice, after observing her for a moment. "In a few months you will see your mother worthier of the name of mother than she has ever been. All I ask you to do is sign here . . . that's it . . . her transfer. Since you are of age, and the only member of her family, it's more correct this way. Oh, and another signature. There. I believe you are really taking the wisest course. Clearly, it's very difficult for you, considering her condition, to make any objection."

For a moment her grey eyes seemed to relent as they rested upon Alberte with a kind of pity. Then again they were calm, neutral, indifferent.

"I'll send her in to you now," she went on in another tone. "Don't be upset if you find her a little agitated. Try not to excite her. Only yesterday, Nurse Léaucourt, having mistakenly argued with her over one of her phantasies, was slapped by her."

She laid her immaculate, long and rather virile-looking hand upon Alberte's shoulder.

"Don't torment yourself, child," she said quickly. "You have acted for the best."

Alberte remained alone. The waiting-room was small, with big, chintz-covered armchairs, the walls papered in dark red and off-white, a fake chimney-piece had its mantel adorned with a bronze clock flanked by two gilded troubadours. A few family photographs would have made it resemble the first-floor sitting-rooms to be glimpsed at night in the suburbs; but it also lacked warmth and life. The polished hardwood floor, the gleaming provincial-style chest of drawers, the starched curtains, all looked like things pictured in a furniture catalogue, things that had seen no wear and tear, and in the midst of which no normal life had unfolded, nothing but inhuman interviews between embarrassed patients, cut off from the outside world, and visitors entangled in their good intentions and their useless gifts. Alberte reflected with some remorse that she had brought nothing. Fortunately she still had some banknotes. By an unconscious association of ideas, she thought of her father. Why did that woman seem to imagine that it was Klaes who had particularly wanted Elsa to have medical treatment? Yet they had made the decision together, had they not?

Elsa came in. For a moment they both remained silent. Curiously, this repose had, if anything, aged Elsa. Wandering the streets of the Triangle, cheeks aflame, garments torn, she was grotesque and a little frightening; but she was ageless. Here, that illusion was dispelled. The severe arrangement of her hair revealed the grey locks among the brightly tinted blonde ones. The face, less thin had become spiritless, as if swamped in unlovely fat. And the body imprisoned in a decent dress looked sad and formless. But the sulky way in which Elsa stared at her hands and her obvious resolve not to speak were still the same.

Alberte was disconcerted. She was so used to finding her mother in bed in the big, disorderly room, was so used to scolding her, handing her corset to her, taking a bottle away from her. But here in the waiting-room of the clinic she had neither reason to scold nor to act. All there was to do was to talk, and Alberte realized

with surprise that perhaps she had never had a real conversation with her mother.

"Mamma," she said awkwardly, "are you angry with me?"

She at once bit her lip. That was surely the worst thing she could have said. To seem to imagine that Elsa was to be pitied—what a blunder! And, consequently, Elsa raised her head and replied in a doleful voice.

"I will forgive you before I die, Bertha. Because they're making me die, that's sure; it's to their interest. Oh, they give me smirks and smiles, but only yesterday one of them was trying to make me talk, trying to find out our family secrets. Well, I slapped her! 'I'll not let myself be diddled by anyone,' I said. 'Elsa Damiaen of the great banker family won't let herself be had!' And do you know what she said to me? She said, 'I see, Madame Damiaen, that you were born a lady! They had told me awful things about you.' . . ."

As she talked herself into a state of excitement, her face gradually looked a little like the face of the Elsa of former times. And Alberte felt the old irritation spring up anew, that involuntary hardening of her whole being which from her infancy had set her, mute and indomitable, against her mother.

"Oh, come, Mamma," she flung out, "stop talking nonsense. You're here for medical treatment, and no one wishes you harm."

Elsa broke into a laugh.

"Medical treatment! Is that what he told you?"

"He? Who?" said Alberte, annoyed

"Oh, I know what I'm saying. It must be to someone's interest, without that no one would have bothered me. Maybe some big interests are at stake! They wanted to get rid of me, now they shut me up. It's normal, all that, it's normal. I don't even complain. It's not your fault, my poor Bertha. But they'll get you, too, one day. You'll see. You don't bear the name of Damiaen for nothing."

Instinctively she made the gesture of draping herself, as she used to do, in her Spanish shawl, but her hands dropped when she found

nothing around her shoulders. Alberte had an inexplicable heart-ache at sight of that pitiful gesture.

"You see, they've taken away my pretty clothes?" said Elsa, with a rather tremulous smile. "They want me to believe. . . . But just wait, they'll see what they shall see! When I come into my share in the bank. . . ."

Alberte stood up. Of what use was it to remain and hear the same words over and over? She almost regretted having come.

"You're going already?" said Elsa, with a note of regret.

Alberte recalled the Three Storks. There, her mother had always showed relief at parting. Here, they must refuse to listen to her and she had to fall back upon her daughter. Again she hardened her soul.

"I'll come again, Mamma. Do you want me to bring you something?"

Elsa leaned towards her with a mysterious look.

"Bring magazines," she whispered. "They don't want to give me any. They're afraid I'll read the news."

"Why, what news?"

"Oh, there's always news worth learning. I'm surprised even that they let you come. I thought he'd keep you. . . . You're going? But let me tell you something——"

"Goodbye, Mamma," said Alberte.

She could not bear to hear that voice any longer, could not endure that familiar chatter, in which, however, could be discerned a faltering note. She went out, crossed the garden. Through the iron bars of the gate, she could still see her mother standing there in the reception room, mouth open, fixed, as in a photograph.

She had been wrong to pay this visit. Elsa was not yet cured, much more time was needed, the lady doctor had said. She would not come back until the new treatment should have some effect—if it had any effect. That strange woman had not seemed too sure of herself.

It was cold. Alberte hurried her steps. But a little before reaching

the house she stopped, overwhelmed with an unexpected lassitude. Would her father not question her again, want to know what had happened, and then, from question to question. . . .?

"What's got into them all?" she groaned aloud, utterly worn out. "Why do they all want to tell me their troubles?"

Chapter Twenty - One

MOTIONLESS, she leaned against the wall of the house, unconscious of the cold, the gathering darkness, the white snowflakes that were beginning to hover round her. It took the banging of a door not far off to drag her out of this lethargy.

"Why, what are you doing here, Mademoiselle Alberte?" said a sharp voice nearby. It was the stenographer who, felt hat pulled down over her eyes, a brief-case under her arm, was setting out with precise little steps to walk home from work. "You'll catch cold, why, yes, it's beginning to snow. We've had warm weather long enough, the change had to come, didn't it? Oh, but we're going to have our hands full tomorrow! I mean to say, I'm going to have a lot of work to do, for you, of course, don't have to work, now."

"Now?" said Alberte mechanically.

Then she remembered that these words had already unleashed her father's anger. But Mademoiselle Paule, on the contrary, seemed delighted to reply.

"Why, yes, now. Things have changed, haven't they? Now that we hope. . . . To speak frankly, I've never liked Madame Nuñez. No precision, no sense of order, no. . . ."

Not waiting to hear more, Alberte unceremoniously left her and hurried into the house. It was warm there. The fires had evidently been lighted that afternoon. She hadn't even noticed that it had begun to snow.

Someone was talking in the dining-room. She went down the

corridor on tiptoe. It was very necessary, this evening, not to be heard. Her father must by now have gone upstairs; if he called out to her, she would pretend not to hear. Softly, she climbed the stairs, reached her room, entered, and shut the door behind her. Then, very deliberately, she undressed, folded her clothes, and put on her nightgown. She would not go down to dinner. It was time to think things out.

Alberte was an orderly girl, and for the first time there was no order in her thoughts. Calmly she sat down on the bed, frowning,—not with agitation, but a little pensively, like a housekeeper confronting an accumulation of soiled linen and estimating the time needed to cope with it. Something was disturbing her, deep down, a feeling of inner conflict that she must search out and identify. Surely, with time and patience, it could be done. She would proceed as she did with those books she so often tried to read, unavailingly, for when she reached the end of the story she sometimes couldn't remember how it began. Then, patiently, she re-read the book from first page to last and, when she again reached the end, she was often able to understand. This was the same sort of thing. She must go back to the beginning, find the source of her trouble. But what beginning? The beginning of a book is the first word. The beginning of a feeling of uneasiness and constraint, an inner conflict causing a physical malaise, would it be found in the beginning of her life, in the first words pronounced or heard? The first words heard had been spoken by her mother: "I sacrificed myself. . . . In the manor house of my parents. . . . We had to part. . . ." So, the very first words she had heard had been lies! She gave an involuntary start at that old shame buried deep within her. But she had begun to seek the cause, and she must go on.

There she sat, in the semi-darkness of her room, without paying attention to the sounds of the house around her—Suzanne came to ask, in amazement, if she didn't want her dinner, and she had calmly said that she did not, that she had a headache—and also oblivious to that almost physical pain aroused by so many memories. She concentrated only on the effort to remember, as one struggles

at an unfamiliar piece of work. She must find again the bitterness that had always armed her against Elsa. But why was it so hard to find? Had these past few weeks with her father inured her to a flood of words? For he, too, talked. But it was conversation, and for her it was simply a question of giving him companionship. He had said so. He talked to her about her mother and it made her suffer. But how could he guess it? He had said, "She is insane, completely insane, and has always been so." No doubt that had been why he had wanted no more to do with her. Alberte herself, had she not been tempted more than once to give up even her brief visits to the Three Storks? She had a grudge against Elsa, as Klaes had had—still had, perhaps. From his way of talking, you quite felt that he was still hunting down some elusive phantom. But if Elsa was insane, could it be held against her? If she was not insane, why give her medical care?

Alberte's head reeled. Once again she had lost the thread. She would have to start all over again from the beginning. The first words. If Elsa was insane, they were not lies but simply the words of a person suffering from a malady or from an accident.

"You have acted for the best," Dr. Hélène Franck had said. "Evidently, it would have been hard for you to object. . . ."

Everything was simple and clear. Elsa was insane and would one day be cured. But where, then, was the source of that anger she felt in her father? "She was a bad mother to you!" he had said. And, "She wanted to blackmail me!" Klaes, usually so sure of himself, lost his cool-headedness whenever it was a question of Elsa. He was always calm and cool, or else exhibiting an aggressive pleasure which she did not understand. How could she understand that word "now," which signified, "now that everything is changed, now that I am no longer in danger"? How could her father be put in danger by that mad woman?

In the darkness that had become complete, Alberte began softly to cry. She must have fallen asleep, for the creaking of the door made her start up.

"Yves!"

If only by the silence, she would have guessed that it was Yves.

Besides, though she could not see him, she felt his presence as surely as if she had seen him in broad daylight. The door shut again. He was in the bedroom, still silent, but with that quick breathing, that panting of a driven beast that made it possible to recognize him out of a thousand.

"Yves, are you crazy? What are you doing here? Why, if they've heard you. . . . What time is it?"

"Past eleven," he said, at last, in a whisper. And without warning he flung himself upon her as she sat there in bed, crushing her in his arms, hiding his face on her knees, as if in the darkness she could have seen it, contorted with fear.

"I couldn't stand it any longer, Alberte," he said in a hurried and feverish voice. "It's been weeks, you hear, weeks since we've been together. I've a feeling we're being watched, I know I'm being spied upon. Old lady Nuñez doesn't let me out of her sight, she watches me every time I go near you. And you say nothing, you see nothing, you're forgetting me."

She opened her lips to protest, but he gave her no time to reply, carried away in a whirlwind of grief.

"Oh, I know what's happening! All you do, now, is try to get round the old man. And when you've done that, you'll not want a fellow like me, without money or position, incapable of doing anything worthwhile. Oh, don't worry! I know what I'm worth, and it's what your father tells me straight to my face. Alberte, be frank, don't hedge. Oh, God! I want you to tell me the truth!"

"Yves," she whispered, in a panic of fear and despair, "Yves, it's not true. My dearest!"

He did not even hear that word of tenderness which she pronounced so awkwardly, for he was intent on plumbing the depths of his fear and bitterness, savagely wanting to hurt and destroy everything, including himself, until, nerves shattered, he would find a shameful peace.

"Why should you love me? You'll be able, now, to marry anyone you like. There are plenty of eligible men in this town, and they'll not haggle. You'll have the brewery behind you. And after

all, what makes you think that's not what I wanted, too? A girl with a small dowry—all the same, that's not so hard to find, and there was your mother, see. Some people would even have thought us well matched. But now—oh, now, it's another thing! The heirs are in a panic, your mother's disappeared from circulation, and why shouldn't I disappear, too? You'll have a free field. I'm sure if I said a word to your father, he'd kick me out!"

"Yves!" she implored. "How can you?"

- But Yves could not stop, he had to go on and on, until he reached the moment of collapse, when he would be delivered of that venom that had been welling up in him through the years.

"And why shouldn't you say it's all over? After all, you've promised me nothing. You needed to wait for your dowry. But four years—that's a long time to wait. You wouldn't have waited that long for me, I'll bet. And you aren't even my mistress. Oh, no, you're much too cautious for that! You must have had some suspicion that the old fool would soften up at the end of his life. And while waiting, it was fun to pretend you loved me. You did suspect it, didn't you, didn't you?"

His voice choked on a sob, tears bathed his face, and she was expecting him any minute to calm down like an exhausted child, when suddenly she felt him sit up and found herself pushed back upon the bed with such unforeseen violence that she uttered a moan. Beneath his wrathful kisses she momentarily experienced again the desire she had felt the first time he had held her like this in his arms. But then she wrenched herself away suddenly and threw herself off the bed on the opposite side. With a bound, she reached the French window, and opened it.

An icy cold penetrated the room.

"Get out, Yves, for heaven's sake," she said in a voice shaken with confusion and the childish impulse to laugh at him for being so easily consoled. "Get out. All the house will hear us. I'll scream out the window to Aunt Odilia if you don't go, Yves!"

Without a word he approached, trembling with resentment and desire, and also, deep down, there was that sly, calculating thought

which had obsessed him throughout the evening: taking her by force meant taking simultaneously Klaes' entire fortune and making it his own along with her.

"Yves!" she exclaimed. She was really not afraid of him, for she had so often managed to hold him off. But suddenly she had forgotten her cares and was again merely a healthy and good-natured girl, fascinated and yet frightened by a man. "If you don't leave me, I'll scream!"

"You wouldn't have them throw me out, would you?"

He was sure, now, of making her yield, his hand was already on her shoulder, he drew nearer, nearer, aroused by a ruthless joy, as if conquering her would mean conquering at the same time and forever all his fears.

"Yves, if you don't go, I'll run out into the garden!" she whispered.

"In the snow? You'd not do that."

He was about to clasp her in his arms, when suddenly she was off with a bound, had escaped through the window and was standing on the tiny balcony, shivering beneath the snowflakes that continued to fall, but smiling at him with a kind of roguishness that made him wild. He stepped towards her, she recoiled.

"Alberte, you're crazy! You're going to catch your death of cold!"

The need to whisper made them feel like conspirators or like children about to play a forbidden game.

"You were crazy, too, just now. Will you let me alone?"

"No," he said wrathfully, sure she would go no farther, and jumping towards her.

With a faint cry, she bounded recklessly forward, descended the three steps of the terrace, and ran, her long nightgown streaming out in her wake, her hair undone, her bare feet sinking into the thin layer of snow, and she laughed, suddenly entranced with this wild chase through the icy air.

Yves ran after her, but less swiftly, knowing quite well that at the end of the garden she would have no time to open the barred gate, and would be unable to escape him, for at that point she

would be stopped by the prickly hedge of strawberry-trees. Then he would take her into his arms.

They ran, forgetting the dark house behind them, where enemy eyes were possibly spying upon them, forgetting everything, perhaps even the object of this mad race. In front of the prickly hedge Alberte hesitated a moment, but Yves was already near, sure of himself, and so, with triumphant laughter, she plunged into the hedge.

The scorching pain of hundreds of thorns tearing her nightgown and scratching her body did not stop her and, leaving behind her shreds of white cloth, she was about to flee still farther, along the deserted road beside the river, when she stumbled and fell, laughing and breathless, upon the grassy edge of the road.

In a moment Yves was beside her, against her. She was panting slightly, her cheeks were still burning and scarlet. Through her torn nightgown could be seen her young bosom, spattered with droplets of blood.

"Oh, Yves! What fun," was all she said. He had taken off his waistcoat and was slipping it beneath her shoulders. . . .

When they got up, it was he, for the first time, who sustained her. She pressed herself closely against him.

"I'm cold," she said plaintively.

"Do you want me to carry you?"

He lifted her in his arms, amazed to find her strong body so light. And suddenly, looking up at him, she whispered, "Yves, supposing we go away?"

"Go away?" he said uncertainly.

Before them stretched the empty road, the dark river. They were alone. For a moment he, too, had the strange intuition that if they were to remain in this miraculous world, freed from all their shackles, together, till the end of time, that road offered them their one hope of escape. Then he raised his eyes towards the house, and fear surged over him again. Go away where? To his little room near the warehouses, where he had spent such difficult years with his invalid father? To the Three Storks, in Elsa's bed?

Slowly, he returned up the road towards the gate, still holding Alberte in his arms. Of herself, she stretched out a hand to push the creaking bolt. Slowly, he went back up the path and climbed the three steps of the terrace.

In the house, all was quiet.

Chapter Twenty - Two

TRAMPS were sleeping here and there among the warehouse crates, sprawled in strange postures, occasionally flinching and quivering like sick dogs. A few stray cats prowled round the closed fishmongers' stalls, licking the pavement where lingered bits of crushed flesh or traces of blood. A fog hovered round the electric pylons, the black hulls of boats, the tall house-fronts, the warehouses with black doors rising one above the other, opening out upon the void, strange, with the loading cranes taken away. A few children, well muffled, with black baskets on their arms, stood waiting. It was still night, cold and quiet, for a few minutes. But already the little cafés were lighting up, corrugated steel blinds were being raised with dramatic flourish. The black doors opened, yawning wide upon emptiness, and began to swallow, one after the other, the heavy wooden crates, hoisted by an enormous creaking pulley, which was etched darkly against the sky and was manoeuvred from below, by a minuscule man. A little trawler left the port. From the deck of a tanker someone shouted. Fishing boats detached themselves from the quay and moved in the direction of the dark mass of the floating dock that looked, in the half light, like a gigantic whale. And from everywhere, from houses and boats, from between the stacked crates, men seemed to emerge miraculously, in ever greater numbers. The tramps disappeared into the narrow streets of the Triangle, the wooden crates vanished into the air. One of them broke away from the crane and fell with a great clatter, bursting open and letting a flood of oranges escape and bringing the children on a run. At last a factory

siren echoed, and engines began to vibrate in the bellies of trucks. It was six o'clock in the morning.

In Madame Nuñez' bedroom the light was on. Propped up among her pillows, her face plastered with cold cream but looking as haughty as ever, her hair caught in a net, her hand dipping from time to time into a box of caramels, she was reading the last page of a yellow paper-back:

"You are the murderer!" Before anyone thought of approaching, the little man had turned round, had swallowed a capsule that he had been holding in the palm of his hand, and collapsed on the ground. An effort was made to revive him. "Too late!" said the detective, with a shrug. "It's better, this way, for him." And he threw his coat over the corpse."

Madame Nuñez put down the book with a sigh of contentment. She had suspected the inoffensive pharmacist from the beginning, and felt a certain satisfaction at the exactness of her deductions. What would have become of her without this literature which she absorbed in strong doses, not so much out of a taste for easy reading as for the particular pleasure of tracking down one of her fellow creatures through those pages? She would have preferred, of course, that the fellow creature be of flesh and bone. In medieval times, she would have enjoyed hunting witches; or had she been American, she would have loved to belong to a woman's club and be one of those women who decide and settle things and influence popular opinion with all the weight of their hearty and superfluous flesh. Had she been a member of the best society of the town of A, she would have contented herself with a social inquisition, cheerfully banishing some, putting others in the pillory. Alas, when she had returned to A, still hoping to come into a decent sum of money from the sale of the Nuñez Stores, she had disdained that society, which had since returned the disdain with interest. So she had to satisfy herself with these pages, which helped her pass the time. It would be for a year, she had thought at first, one or two years, the time required for Klaes to untangle her affairs. But the negotiations for settling the estate had dragged on and on, and when finally she had derived an insufficient allowance from those laborious negoti-

ations, she was already so accustomed to live with her brother that. . . . And then, hadn't he led her to hope—oh, without promising anything, but with meaningful glances and veiled allusions and vague speeches—that one day he would do something for her so that she could resume the life of luxury she had once so enjoyed? She had waited, without undertaking anything, always hoping to leave the gloomy house and the familiar tyranny that reigned there. She had waited, becoming gradually embittered, her normal lively and generous temperament—the temperament of a healthy woman loving life, good food, the comfort of luxury hotels, the superficial contacts with agreeable people met at resorts—becoming vitiated by the heavy atmosphere of this house, which deprived her of the courage to go elsewhere to live and enjoy that freedom she pretended to enjoy and regard as indispensable. The natural indolence of a woman once beautiful and spoiled, made much of, cherished, the comfort she could not do without and with which Klaes, periodically, with unconscious knavery, inundated her, had deprived her of all courage. Embittered, her vitality had shrivelled, turned aggressive, boiled down to the dimensions of cantankerousness; she gave herself the illusion of independence by tormenting Klaes with pin-pricks, which he endured with the patience of an old lion pestered by mosquitoes. From time to time the blow of a brutal paw put Madame Nuñez in her place.

As for maternal instinct, she had very little. Her son had been sixteen when she was widowed, and he did not resemble her. What else remained to her, except mystery novels, a greedy appetite she had been unable to check, and the hope which had grown during the past five years that Klaes would die? She had already given herself up to a kind of somnolent existence when that hope had come to revive her. Klaes was her elder; in addition, he was a sick man. Life returned to Madame Nuñez with unsuspected virulence; hate rejuvenated her, it was a tonic. She had even tried to check her gluttony, had followed her son's prescriptions for a time. Surely she could count on some enjoyable years ahead of her, once Klaes was dead? From then on, even her detective stories took on a singular life and intensity. A phrase such as "And he threw his

coat over the corpse " awoke in her a flood of long-caressed images: the big body of her brother stretched out on his bed, all the yellow fat, as if deflated, his dark eyelids shut like scars over his imperious stare. That thought inspired in her a kind of malicious joy. Already she could imagine herself in the role of a matron used to handling the dead, washing the corpse, disdainfully handling it, before her final liberation when she would go away in the sleeping-car, wake up in a country of sunshine, and re-enter that artificial world in which respectful young hotel pages opened the doors; in that world, at last, she would be able to live tranquilly.

Thus she had lulled herself, scanning the face of her brother for the least sign of failing. At last, the goal was in sight, and that little peasant girl came to put everything in danger! " She's making him anxious," Philippe had said, " and she's capable of arousing his anxiety to such a point that he'll consult another physician. I warn you, keep a sharp lookout! She's bound to do something imprudent, one day or another." And it was true. If only she had had the presence of mind to shout and wake up old Klaes three weeks before, when she had been astonished at seeing a dark form on the snowy garden path! But she had not at first seen what Yves was carrying in his arms. Barely had she realized that they were returning to the house, when a door had banged. And it was by then too late, for Klaes would not have believed it. Even Philippe had exclaimed, " In the snow? That's incredible!" He had also said, " What a shame you weren't at your window sooner." Now, she was watching every night until midnight, sitting in the chair by the window. But nothing as yet had happened. And she woke up at dawn to go on with the reading of her detective story, watching again, ready to jump at the least sound. But there was none. Apparently Alberte's suspicions had been aroused. Patience, she would grow weary much sooner than Madame Nuñez, who knew only too well what that waiting of a young girl was like, what desire was like when exacerbated by fear. In the days of her youth, she had left the house at five in the morning, sometimes; she could still hear that soft jangling of the bolt and chain—the same one was still there, with its little bronze hearts. If she had

been caught, what would her mother, that pitiless Ursula, have said? She had been seventeen, then.

The man had been a draper's assistant; she had forgotten what he looked like, remembering only the little bedroom on the other side of the dock where he had waited for her. No one had ever suspected anything. Except, perhaps, Klaes, who went early to work, checking the accounts, drawing up his plans for enlarging the draper's shop. For a moment she recalled what Klaes was like at that time—big, already imperious, but so handsome, and radiating that arrogance that their mother could not endure. She had admired him, then. And it was the same man who was sleeping not far away, in the room that had been their parents' bedroom, and who would die without knowing it. As Erna had said, "It's better for him, that way." Erna was certainly the stupidest blockhead she had ever met.

For a moment her thoughts wandered to her daughter-in-law and her son, whom she confounded in the same contempt. Then she again thought of Klaes. The day she had married, he had already been rather odious. "Go on, my girl," he had said, "your Nuñez is a no-account, I'm warning you. The proof: he doesn't know how to argue, I noticed it at the breakfast table. People like that are, let me tell you, all a bunch of thieves, and we've got to let them see we know it." She had laughed and protested. Surely it wouldn't have been proper for Nuñez to argue at the wedding breakfast! Klaes had always been like that: not miserly, but contemptuous, superior, incapable of giving anything spontaneously, giving only to get something in return. Even his gifts, you saw at once that they weren't real gifts; they were concessions or services or acknowledgments of services. No matter what, he always made you pay for those gifts. Suddenly her hatred flooded over her again, dragging her out of her melancholy souvenirs. She must be patient for a while longer, after which, she would not even think about Klaes any more. She reached out, took a caramel, and again stared at the window.

"Can't you sleep?" asked Simone, with a yawn.

Philippe had got out of bed to open the window.

"It's really too hot. Victor heats this house in a senseless way, I've told you a hundred times."

"It's on account of Louise^{te}," murmured Simone. "It's freezing, you know, and her room is so damp."

Philippe said nothing and went back to bed, pretending to be unaware that Simone had crept close to him. Always that hunger for love! He had drawn from her a long time ago all the pleasure she could give him. He didn't stop her, did he, from finding pleasure elsewhere? But for a long time he had realized she was incapable of that. Every time she was on the point of deciding to, all she needed to renounce the idea and be filled with hope was a word or gesture from him. Indeed, since he no longer even made the gesture, she had renounced these pathetic pretences.

"Gold is down," said Philippe, to avoid any tender passage. "I was thinking about my Katangas. Things are not going very well these days. Oh, it'll go up again, but not before. . . ."

". . . years and years," said Simone, with conviction.

She had her faults, but she did take an interest in business matters.

"What's needed," she went on, "is a little agitation, the sound of a gun. And steel is down, too. You must have lost, during these past days, something like. . . ."

"More than that," said Philippe. "It's about time Klaes decided to konk out."

"Is that making any progress?" she asked, as if talking about the stock-market. When it didn't concern love or money or Louise^{te}, Simone had a cool head.

"So-so, Roger seems to think he can hold out another six months. But in my opinion——"

"Yes?" (She had a blind confidence in him).

"He chats a little every day with me, you know. Well, I have the impression that Alberte is killing him by inches. At the least word he flies into a temper, yells, gets short of breath. He says he doesn't sleep any more, he complains of agonizing pains. Oh, he's none too well."

"But after all, what's wrong with him? You'll not make me

believe it's because that girl is bewitching him! That doesn't happen nowadays. He has a disease, and he'll die of it, that's all."

"My poor dear Simone, you are singularly lacking in a feeling for metaphysics. Naturally we always die of a sickness. Merely sick, Klaes could hold out another two years. But sickness plus Alberte—he'll not hold out another six months. That's what I'm telling you."

"But for heaven's sake, Phil, what does she do to him?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing, that's just it. That adorable girl has adopted a system that's diabolically clever, it consists merely in not falling into any of the traps our Uncle Klaes patiently sets for her. She doesn't pretend to adore him, as we all stupidly do, she doesn't gape with admiration about the new installations in the brewery, the ones he keeps dinning into our ears, she doesn't beg for gifts like Aunt Odilia, she doesn't grow pale with terror as does her fortunate lover. In short, she is the flaw in the edifice, the weak link in the chain—I could give you a string of comparisons—she's replaced the role of her worthy mother."

"But her mother. . . ."

". . . was insane, understood. But Alberte is not insane. For a long time I wondered if she weren't simply stupid. But now I'm inclined to believe she's an unrecognised genius. Which doesn't displease me. A stupidity that persistent was beginning to get on my nerves. But now I think it may only be a screen."

Simone had no interest in psychology.

"Do you think he's going to acknowledge her legally?"

"Not if I intervene in time. And Aunt Odilia is on the lookout. The girl's sensuality will destroy her. If she's given herself to that little idiot of a Sarfati, just when she's this near the goal, she wouldn't be able to resist a second time. But I must say, if that was the only thing, I'd have little hope."

"I don't understand at all," said Simone. "What does he want of her, after all?"

"My dear, there comes a moment when a man is reduced to very little—a passion, a vice. What's left for Klaes to desire? He's made money, enlarged his mills, tyrannized his household, you

might say driven away his parents, and even had an insane woman who bothered him locked up. His acquisitive instinct has to settle on something. Alberte is there, it's Alberte he wants. Rest assured that the day he's sure of her and her admiration and love, she'll mean no more to him than any of us do. To the very end, he'll try to buy—that's all. He's a tradesman to his finger-tips."

"But you don't believe that if he knew he was going to die. . . ."

Philippe guffawed.

"So, you're going in for psychology, now? Oh, evidently, that would hasten things. A dying man clings to anything. But since he doesn't know it. . . . Come, let's try to sleep. It's crazy of us to have serious conversations about death at five in the morning. We're no longer fifteen."

He slid to the edge of the bed to avoid touching her. But contrary to his expectation, she did not budge.

"Phil, what would you cling to, if you were going to die?" she suddenly asked.

She, if she were dying, would at least have the memory of Philippe, the suffering that came from Philippe, and would have her daughter, who was a mingling of herself and Philippe, indestructibly, her daughter who consoled her for everything, who enabled her to face each day the absence of Philippe, the loss of her beauty, the sterility of her life.

"Oh, my God, Simone, what a question! Why, I'd cling to nothing, of course. It's very inelegant to cling, don't you think?"

She said nothing. He was annoyed at her silence. If Simone set herself to thinking!

"In any event," he said, with studied spitefulness, "I know very well what you'd cling to. Always and forever to me, quite likely."

He felt her flinch and stiffen under the blow. In a moment she would move away from him, softly, and lie on the other edge of the bed, weeping in silence. He wondered how he had ever been able to take pleasure in making her suffer. Sleep hovered, overcoming him gradually, barely distinguishable from his total indifference.

•

On tiptoe, the little boy had drawn near the window, pushed back the curtains, and eagerly looked outside. The sun had not yet risen, but the roofs gleamed in the flickering glimmer of the street light. The boy wondered if the river was frozen. Noiselessly, the door opened.

"I was sure of it!" whispered Erna. "Now will you kindly go back to bed, Rik! It's not seven o'clock, and there you are, up! Go to bed, or I'll call your father!"

The child reluctantly approached.

"I want to put on my clothes," he said decidedly. "I want to go see if the river is frozen. I want to put on my skates. I want——"

"'I want, I want!' Children shouldn't say 'I want'," Erna protested with assumed vehemence.

In fact nothing had ever prevented Rik from doing what he wanted.

"Well, I tell you, I'm getting up," he affirmed, his fair brows gathered in a frown. "It's only old people who stay in bed."

Erna capitulated and lit the little rose-coloured lamp.

"At least don't wake up your brother," she implored.

"All right, to please you," Rik consented, magnanimously. "But he wouldn't die of it, you know."

Suddenly he bubbled with laughter, for no apparent reason. Erna encircled him in her arms, burying her head in his neck, biting him lightly—a female, licking her young.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked, continuing to sniff at him and pet him, in perfect delight.

"Because I'm thinking about Uncle Klacs," said Rik, with a new burst of laughter.

He tried unsuccessfully to free himself from the maternal embrace, gave it up, and whispered into her ear, with enormous delight: "BECAUSE I KNOW THAT HE'S GOING TO DIE!"

"Rik!" said Erna, shocked. "It's not nice to say things like that. And to begin with, it's not at all sure."

"Yes, it's sure, yes it's sure!" the child said, prancing with joy. "I heard Papa say it to Grandma last night."

"So you listen outside doors, now? That's very naughty!"

"Why don't you tell the truth when I'm there? Why don't you ever tell the truth?"

"It's not for children of your age," said Erna, a bit staggered.

"And why don't you tell it to him, then? Ain't it for his age, Uncle Klaes' age? Why don't you tell him he's going to conk out soon?"

Erna heaved a sigh of terror. How did Rik always manage to know everything that went on in the house? Roger would be furious if he knew. But Rik was such an exceptional child!

"Listen, Rikki, you mustn't talk about that to anyone. We don't tell him because we don't want to hurt him, you see. He mustn't know. You'll not say a word, Rik?"

"Of course not." (He slipped away and was looking for his shoes under the bed). "But me, I'd rather be hurt than have them tell me bunk."

He was dressing now, carefully buttoning his shirt, then his sweater. Erna looked at him admiringly. Dangerous Rik, who at ten was already criticizing his father! "And yet," she reflected, "Roger says it's more humane. He says you never tell people they're going to die, it's just not done." She herself had been on the brink of death when Antoine was born, and they hadn't dared tell her until several months afterwards. She remembered having felt a little shocked. What, it was as simple as that? Those days when she had felt so worn out, so empty of desires, with a slight dizziness, a resigned acceptance of everything, the wrinkle in the sheet that had worried her and which she couldn't smooth out, the tea that seemed too sweet but which she drank without protest, the dreadful nurse whom she had passively tolerated, all this represented being "on the brink of death"! It was as simple as that! She had held a little grudge against them for having hidden from her the fact that she was so interesting. If she had known—well, what if she had known! It seemed to her she had missed something, like that moment when the string showing under the coat of the conjurer lets you see through his trick and find out where he hides the rabbit. But it must be dangerous to know. How could you enjoy the show if you did? Once you knew, things must singularly

change, you must feel very alone, alone, and different. She shivered. After all, she ought instead to be grateful to them for having spared her.

Rik had finished dressing. He drew near her, disturbed at seeing her so silent.

"Mummy! You're not sad!"

She hugged him again, with all her strength, fiercely.

"No, Rikki darling, my little flower."

"A flower's a girl," Rik observed sagely. "You ought to call me instead 'My little vegetable'."

She began to laugh.

"I like it better when you laugh. You don't care a bit, do you!"

"About what, Rikki!"

"About the old man . . . I mean, Uncle Klaes. As for me, you know, I don't care at all whether they tell him or not. It was just to talk. You don't care a bit, do you!"

"Not a bit, sweetheart. Not a bit."

Again she kissed him on the neck. She could never, never, weary of kissing him. He submitted to it sweetly. Antoine always pulled away. In a great outburst of love, she reaffirmed, "Not the least bit, darling. Mamma is like you, she doesn't care what happens."

Rikki's laughter filled the room.

"Those church bells!" exclaimed Klaes van Baarnheim to himself. "Why, there are ten times more of them than when I was young!"

Two minutes before this, he had passionately longed for sound, any sound to break the great dark silence; a banging door, a voice calling, the tinkle of a bicycle in the street, no matter what. But his unspoken appeal was responded to by the church bells, only the inhuman sound of the church bells, one after another, succeeding each other so swiftly and lightly in that town full of churches that you would have said it was a flight of colourless birds which came, which went, passing again and again in great sad circles over the house. At last the nearest one, the highest pitched, the most desolate, the bell of Sainte-Gudule made its off-key jangling heard,

whispering that winter would never end, that night would never end, then grew still. Again Klaes was alone in the silence. Alone for the first time, perhaps, for upon groping about in his dim memory, it was the first time that he found himself without desires. As if everything had slowed down around him, even the spasm of pain kept him waiting. And this emptiness was more terrible than anything. Once before, only once, he had experienced this feeling. It was at the beginning of summer, he was in the brewery that he had not yet brought up to date. He could see, in his mind's eye, the brew-kettle, huge, bulging monster, from which a thick steam escaped, could hear again the roar of the suction pumps in the little engine-room. How the place had grown since that time! There were three kettles nowadays. And he had gone for a moment to the window overlooking the docks. With both hands he had held on to the window frame and for yet another minute his mind had wandered. The orders were not numerous. Had he been wrong to take over this almost bankrupt enterprise, wrong to spend all that money on advertising? Suddenly he had felt emptied of everything. Outside, there was the busy port, the sunlight bouncing off a silvery tanker. He took a deep breath, something passed through his mind without leaving a trace, like a cloud in the sky. It was a warm day; a drop of sweat ran down his chest. The tanker was called *Aspasia Nomikos*.

Afterwards, there had been his whole life. Why had he left that moment, when he was immortal? A cable had broken, there had been a great crash. And someone had yelled: "Damnation! A tun of beer gone to the devil!"

Afterwards, there had been his whole life. He could not remember the name of the man who had handled the machinery, could not recall his face. The past whirled by with constantly increasing momentum, giving him glimpses of columns of figures, faces of women, a constant excitement—and then, when it was all over nothing in the dim past remained except the crash of the tun of beer breaking on the floor, the sunlight flashing off the silvery tanker.

Afterwards, there had been his whole life; but that day he had

been alone. From then on nothing had had any importance, the vibration of the little mill around him, his cares, his desires, all that had been suddenly engulfed, had disappeared, leaving only a kind of vague feeling of terror which at the same time was marvellous.

After that, the seasons had passed, and the years. But that—that was the only moment. The splendid autumns, the pompous Christmas services in the red brick church, where his pew was in one of the first rows, the Twelfth Night celebrations with the children blackened with soot and singing the song of The Three Kings, the icy-cold and drunken Carnivals, from which drunkards were carried away, stacked on haycarts like the corpses of the great plagues of olden times. . . . And there had been the barley and malt markets that lasted three days, three days of fighting and arguing, when plots were hatched and false news circulated, for modern methods had not yet been adopted. And on the third day some agreement had to be reached. The street urchins ended the arguments by coming in a procession to offer the brewers, in exchange for a good piece of silver money, whole litters of kittens that symbolically represented the protection of the precious grain against rats. Besides, after the celebration, most of the kittens were drowned—weak and surprised mewings, last choking sounds soon stifled in the kitchen bucket. Then came summer, no matter what summer, with the boats carrying tourists on the canal, the quiet gardens, the skinny little boys, naked and white, hiding in the rushes to go swimming, against the rules. Bands of cobblers from the Black Forest passed through the town, then, selling wooden shoes. And then the town was infested with the odour of mildewed flax, a smell of death, of animals decaying in the sunlight.

Never again had he experienced that feeling of emptiness which was perhaps a presence. Year after year he had crected around him, block by block, this defence, this fortress, in which he found himself today sheltered and imprisoned. And yet, for a moment, while those church bells were ringing. . .

Again and again he sought the lurking place of the desire that would save him and which, in default of worn muscles, would turn the wheels of this old machine for conquering that he had become.

One sole desire, and this emptiness, this silence, this expectancy would disappear—not filled, but negated and banished for ever. The brewery? Alas, for a long time he had only pretended to take an interest in it. Those machines he had so loved, the roaring of the mill grinding grain, the bubbling of the brew-kettles, and all at once the silence and cold dimness of the cellars where the beer fermented in the deep compartments covered with black pitch. Even those machines—he had not gone down to see them for months. Suzanne? Months, too, had passed since he had called for her, the impudence of the servant girl no longer attracted him. For a moment he stretched out his hand to ring for her, hesitated, withdrew his hand. To renounce is to renounce. You cannot resuscitate a dead desire, and in old men desires soon die. He searched again. And now there was that cramping of the stomach, gradually spreading to the heart, extending its pain—like the rings in water where a stone falls—until the entire worn old body was overcome and filled with this mute, dark terror.

In vain did he try to hold out against it, terror took possession of him, dominating those hands that clenched the edge of the bed, that tightened throat, that face with trembling jaw, even the panic-stricken mind scurrying in all directions and finding at the end of every corridor a shut door. Perhaps at last, completely submerged in pain, he would find again, in his total solitude, a path he had not followed since his childhood. . . . But a name came back to him, the memory of a prey he had not yet mastered, and the zest for life flooded up again in him, triumphant, delivering his heart, freeing his breath, roaring in his arteries like a fanfare.

“Alberte!” he shouted.

Chapter Twenty - Three

SLOWLY the car passed down the Quai des Marchands, the most important section of the town of A. One after another the banks that are clustered there filed past their eyes. The massive old temples, dating back a century, gave glimpses of their interiors—velvets and veined marble, deep armchairs upholstered in a reddish brown that made one think of the gummy and sluggish blood circulating in hardened old arteries, the darker brown of the walnut wood panellings—a wealth of comfort displayed, solid and self-assured there on the edge of the quay. Then came the less self-confident banks of the 1900 period, when architecture went in for curlicues, their iron-barred windows twisted into shapes like the corkscrew curls of old maids, their façades abounding in carvings of birds' nests and baskets of fruit, their roofs bristling with multiple chimneys, their doors entwined with sculptured female figures and writhing plants, as though in an effort to make you forget where they actually led. And finally, as the quay continued to unroll, there were the new-born banks, where the polar inferno behind immense plexiglass fronts succeeded in giving a cadaverous aspect to the high-living citizens within, as they discreetly buttoned their coats under the frosty fluorescent lights.

The brewery was situated in a quiet section of town, next door to the dismantled station where three rusty railway coaches lay dormant. It was comprised of three or four low houses joined together, opening out at the rear upon a vast courtyard with, on the other side of it, a more important building.

"Come on, let's go in," said Klaes van Baarnheim, giving Alberte an almost rude push.

At times he took it into his head to treat her as he would a dishonest holder of a debt claim, who must be tracked down and quashed. But this morning he felt certain of victory. The confusion in his thoughts had been dispelled. He was engaging his great battle. That Philippe was along to lean upon in no way embarrassed him. He would not need to talk. The brewery would do the talking.

The anteroom was small, almost cosy, with its oak woodwork, its worn carpet, the narrow stairway leading to the floor above. But the secretary who was nodding drowsily behind a little barred window started up and hurried towards the group of visitors.

"Monsieur van Baarnheim! Why, it's been a long time since we've seen you here! I'll warn Monsieur Dolls you've come."

Simultaneously a man came down the stairs and he, in his turn, exclaimed: "Monsieur van Baarnheim! Why, it's been——"

"They've already told me," Klaes cut in. "See here, I don't need to ask your permission to visit my plant, do I?"

"Why, sir, what a thing to imagine! It's simply that, if we'd been forewarned, we could have——"

The brewer, mollified, began to laugh.

"This isn't an inspection, Dolls, my good man. It's a visit I'm having this young lady make. Alberte. Monsieur Dolls, engineering manager. My daughter."

The manager bowed courteously and seemed to consider this apparition quite usual. But behind her desk, the stenographer, as Philippe noticed, was open-mouthed in astonishment.

"So you're interested in seeing how beer is made?" the manager said to Alberte. "Well, we're not yet in the class of the great modern brewing establishments, but we'll soon be, won't we, sir?"

"Yes indeed. We're going to do some reconstruction, the offices of the Münche. firm will be brought here. But all that will take a little time."

"Time for them to get used to the merger," said Dolls, exchanging a smile with the boss.

Klaes reflected that it had been a mistake on his part not to visit

the brewery for such a long time, for at the very sight of the place he felt ready to take up again the work in which he had lost interest, ready to get excited anew over such and such an improvement that could be brought about, or such and such an effort that should be made.

"Shall I accompany you, sir?"

"Oh, I know the way, I know the way. I only wanted to give the child an idea."

"Your daughter has never visited our plant before?"

"Never," replied the brewer, "because I never brought her." Again they exchanged glances.

"Oh, very well," said Dolls, simply. "In that case, I'll leave you, sir. Monsieur Brenner. . . ."

And with that he disappeared into his office.

"These are the offices," said Klaes. "Not very interesting. Let's go."

They crossed the court, Klaes striding along almost gaily.

"Naturally it's not a gigantic plant," he said proudly. "It was built to produce fifty thousand barrels and we now produce four or five times that amount. Built of odds and ends, that's what this place is, but. . . ."

He was stirred, all of a sudden, to hear again the familiar muffled roar. Built of the odds and ends of his life. Two hundred and fifty workmen, thirty trucks. Not bad, for a small country. But he'd do a great deal more, with München. And he'd succeed in eliminating the Münchens. Yes, he'd succeed. His hand clenched fiercely upon Alberte's shoulder.

A yellow light came through the ground glass of the high placed windows, shining down upon the grey steam engines, corrugated like accordions. heavy old work-horses puffing away, upon which depended the life of those little rooms rising in tiers above them.

"Let's go up," said Klaes.

Philippe, upon whom the old man was leaning with his whole weight, started to make an objection, but Klaes with a crushing glance reduced him to silence. They climbed across dark and tortuous corridors that came out upon temporary platforms or

entered tiny rooms, some triangular, some oblong, that an unexpected need had caused to be cut in two or enlarged by a few yards; they climbed narrow stairs, penetrated damp corridors where their feet got caught in enormous pipes striated with white and black; they bumped their heads against red-painted conduits where the brine circulated. It seemed to Alberte that she was penetrating a strange and terrible world. Suddenly they came out into another room with greenish walls, where were aligned, side by side, with Egyptian severity, gleaming like silver and taller than a man, long carbon dioxide cylinders. Then once more they lost themselves in an interminable labyrinth of stairways, among the roof beams and the red conduits; directly beneath them was a vast shed where were still piled an accumulation of the handsome oak kegs that were no longer in use. And suddenly they were in the narrow room where the round copper brew-kettles were bubbling, good-natured looking, despite the steam that escaped from their sides in dense, whirling clouds. The first one was the oldest, and to house the last one the ceiling had had to be raised in a kind of wooden cupola, encircled by a foot-bridge, so that it resembled the planet Saturn.

In the heat and the stale odour of malted water which at regular intervals emptied its amber-coloured stream into the ageing-vats, Klaes stood motionless for awhile, recaptured the noise, the debonair old monsters that docilely worked for him, rediscovered the twists and turns of the old building which had been added onto a hundred times and a hundred times patched together. Forgotten were his weariness and oppressed breathing. He glanced at Alberte. She had mechanically laid her hand on one of the kettles and was bending down to watch the bubbling liquid. Again, he felt he could triumph. After all, she was close to him, resembled him, was his daughter. That meant something, after all. She could not but feel this intoxication which had the same rhythm as the pulsation of the steam pumps. She could not but admire. . . .

"Let's go on up," he said feverishly. "I want her to see everything there is to see, everything!"

Quietly, Philippe offered his arm, observing the old man attentively. Everything, his swollen eyelids, his shining eyes, his slightly

hoarse breathing, indicated that he was exhausted. "An excursion of this sort," he reflected, "is enough to shorten his life by a month. I wonder when she will realize what a great man her father is?" They were now crossing the light wooden planks of the attic store-room where the beige and brown filter cloths, as stout as sails, were hung up to dry, and in the last store-room, where a wan ray of sunlight fell, the massive, faithful old square grain mill was making its rhythmical hum.

"In the old days," said Klaes, pronouncing his first clear sentence, "you could even see the grain pouring from the silo. It was. . ."

He stopped, incapable of evoking for Alberte the spectacle of the soft powdering of the grain, which would perhaps have subjugated her. She was pale, undoubtedly admiring, but also frightened, and as she continued to remain silent, Klaes shouted in a kind of rage, "You haven't seen everything!"

And away he went to the other side of the loft, dragging them after him, making them go down stairs again, turn on a landing, flounder through dark narrow passage ways where they were splashed with warm water, bend their heads to go through the engine room where two huge cylinders fondly growled in a corner. The odour of the place became more acrid and, as the sunlight began to assert itself through the occasional windows, they beheld the long rank of big copper spigots from which gushed a glittering foam into a copper tank that suddenly blazed in the light like an aureole. Alberte, dazzled, wanted to stop a minute, but Klaes, in a fever of excitement, hurried them on.

"This way, this way. . ."

He made them go down, down, down, urged them onward across a foot-bridge above the enormous jangling of the bottling plant, and, in a deepening shadow, he dragged them after him through icy corridors where frosted conduits serpentine, cooling the beer before conveying it to the fermenting cellars, which they finally reached. And there, in front of the great checkerboard of stone vats with convex rims smeared with pitch, gleaming black in contrast with the furry white foam of the more or less fermented beer, there in that astonishing vault, silent and icy cold, where

rubber-booted men moved about as if in the belly of a whale, Klaes spoke again. His voice was choked, it made a gargling sound in his chest, as he said, "That's all. That's all there is to see."

And in a final effort, his lungs wheezing as he breathed in the icy air of the cellar, he collapsed, his forehead striking heavily against the vat's curved rim of stone.

"He'll pull through all right," said Philippe, as he left the bedroom where Klaes, still stretched out, was already joking about his "faux pas."

"I hope so," said Alberte, very pale, avoiding meeting Philippe's inquisitive eyes.

"I can certainly believe that you hope so!" he said, stopping as he reached the outside door—he was on the point of going out. "That would have been a bad trick to play on you, wouldn't it, for him not to pull through? You've just given an astounding performance!"

She did not reply, but merely looked at him.

"Oh come, Alberte, stop being so mistrustful. Upon my word, I quite believe you've won. You surely understood, didn't you, the significance of that trip to the brewery? Well, what did you find most alluring? The drawing-off apparatus? The racking devices? The suction pumps, perhaps? Or those conduits for cooling the beer, or the spigots in the filtering room, or the turbines? No, don't bother to choose. You'll have the lot—machines, labourers, trucks. If you're lucky, however. But I admit, it was wonderful the way you maintained that absent-minded look, that perfect indifference—although two or three times you weakened, didn't you? No wonder! Your father, in his brewery, is a sight worth seeing! And those big machines representing so much money, all that beer flowing! It really wasn't bad, was it?"

Alberte made an uncertain gesture of protest, then flushed. Yes, she had loved that incessant noise, that vibration that went on continually, modified in different parts of the building, like risen dough which, when handled, bursts in little irregular bubbles. But why was Philippe enjoying noting all this, and with such spiteful

pleasure? She did not comprehend, but somehow felt humiliated.

Philippe shut the door and began to laugh.

"Oh, you see? You must also get out of the habit of blushing. But enough of the joke! While paying tribute to you, my dear Alberte, let me warn you fairly: I have another card up my sleeve. No, I'll not tell you which one. I'm confiding in you, so now you must tell me something. In this affair, we're on equal terms, don't you think? You staked everything, but you might have lost, and you still may lose."

She looked distractedly about her, not knowing how to defend herself, nor against what, but courageously confronting Philippe she spoke at random.

"You think Father wants. . . ?"

"He wants you to be reasonable," he said with satisfaction. "I think you are near the goal. But the least thing could alter the picture. You need advice, Alberte."

He drew near her, like a friend, an ally, stirred with a confused sympathy for her that went farther than his own interests, even. If she would agree to recognize him as her ally, he would gain something even beyond the fortune of the van Baarnheims.

"Alberte, listen to me," he whispered. "You need me, I need you. Let's get together. Together, we'll cut out the lot of them, Aunt Odilia, Roger, the whole gang of servants. They, too, know something's up and are waiting only for the moment to act. Can you see him leaving his fortune to Suzanne? However, it will more likely go to some charity—he's always been fond of the big gesture. And that would perhaps soothe his conscience, or what serves him as conscience, just as much as anything else. Say yes, and we go fifty-fifty. The half of his fortune is still a big slice, you know."

She averted her face. He leaned over her. The nape of her strong neck was close to him. Gently he laid a hand on her shoulder, touched her dark hair, savouring the quality of his emotion. Would she speak? Would she at last yield him her eyes which he had so often seen cold and inscrutable but which he now imagined as melting and sullied with an ignoble thought? Brusquely, almost brutally, he seized the strong chin, kneaded the full and sensual jaw

he so admired, tilted it towards him. . . . But what a pitiful face was this pale face of Alberte's! He had imagined it inflamed with anger or desire, calculating or savage, perhaps revolted. Instead, to his horror, he saw that it was stamped with the astonished resignation sometimes seen on the faces of animals.

"Alberte!" he said, almost wrathfully. "Alberte!"

He no longer whispered, no longer thought of anything except his furious need to have her explain herself.

"All the same, you mustn't think me another Klaes, Alberte!"

She raised her eyes to him with a candour and friendliness that struck him with amazement; and he was still more amazed when, with a hopeless shrug, she said, almost confidingly, "Things are so terribly complicated!"

"Complicated?" he repeated stupidly.

For a moment they stood face to face. Then, all at once realizing the absurdity of the situation, he shrugged. "This girl," he reflected, "is going to drive us all mad."

"So much the worse for you," he said harshly. "You should have grabbed the chance while you had it. You'll regret this!"

His words came up against that incomprehensible expression in her eyes which were as clear and pure, as defenceless and as unrelenting as ever before.

Quickly he went out, banging the door after him.

Chapter Twenty - Four

THREE steps led down to the miserable restaurant of the Gallows Tavern, situated on the only open space of the Triangle. Three steps that Alberte had descended unsteadily. Now she was sitting in the dimness of the low-ceilinged room, with its flagstoned floor, and small leaded window-panes, violet-hued, through which you could see only the legs of the passers-by. She rested an elbow on the wooden table, which resembled the tables at the Three Storks, although this one was adorned with a wrinkled cloth, and when the waitress came to ask what she wanted, she ordered a glass of gin. There was nothing in this, surely, to astound the waitress and surely there was no reason for her to consider Alberte as different from any of the usual customers. Her voice had been so like those of the weary creatures, factory workers or married women or prostitutes that came in here for a glass of gin. It was five o'clock, and darkness was already falling. She did not drink her gin, but sat there absorbed in uneasy reflections, wondering what instinct had driven her into the labyrinth of muddy little streets and brought her to this ill-smelling tavern, to these odours, this gin in front of her, that dirty towel forgotten on a table. She stared at the towel intently, trying to reawaken the nausea of former times, the plain and simple disgust that she had used to feel at such things. But today that disgust was effaced by a still more powerful malaise.

The waitress had set down a glass of gin for herself, too, and had turned on the radio. Now, as if these preparations had put her in a more genial mood, she addressed Alberte.

'So it's no go?' she asked.

Alberte gave a shrug. In a completely confused state of mind, she was recalling Philippe, the words he had whispered and that she had not even understood, she was recalling the noises of the brewery, the round engines on which Klaes had laid his hand, was recalling her mother, and Yves. . . . No, even the thought of Yves was not enough, now, to free her from this paralyzing terror, this fascination which was drawing her, obdurate yet submissive, towards she knew not what abyss. How often in the past three weeks had she thought to escape, to recover her balance, find again the common sense of a simple girl who rejects phantoms! Every time she had encountered Yves in some corner of the house, she had felt again the emotion of that wild night when she had clung to his young body, forgetting everything beneath that burning desire. But even the torment of no longer daring to seek him out, although he slept only ten yards away from her, was no longer enough. She had only to recall the mistrustful look on her father's face, when she had gone into his room, to re-experience that paralysis of thought which had held her motionless and defenceless while Philippe had talked to her.

"I must be ill," she told herself with naïve terror. It was her last hope, that last hope of the poor who, little used to the torments of the mind, cannot find anything in their lives like it except the disquieting lassitude of a hospital convalescence.

She raised desperate eyes to the waitress, who thought she read an appeal in them. Refilling her already empty glass, she came over and sat down abruptly beside Alberte.

"You're not drinking your gin, dearie?" she asked. "You're making a mistake, for gin's good for you."

Her face was worn-looking, sagging and puffy with fatigue, and her eyes were a little haggard. This was probably not her first glass of gin that day.

"Oh, you've not got the habit," she went on. "At your age, dearie—what's your name?"

"Bertha," said Alberte. The name came to her quite naturally.

"Well, Bertha, when I was your age, I was just like you. Yes,

you think there can't be two people on earth with your little troubles, but let me tell you, there are hundreds and thousands just like us. Yes, I was exactly like you, I swallowed it all. Swallowed what? Why, all the bunkum. I believed in love, naturally, but I believed in a lot more. I was going to save money and set up in a little shop of some kind or other in a town high up in the hills. I believed in dressing up of a Sunday and taking a nice little walk. I believed I ought to do this, do that. And I had to save money to get married. Ha, ha, and I was polite on principle and I didn't take a drink till after six on principle. I believed . . . I can't remember what, but I believed, I swallowed it all. I was that big a fool I'd even have believed the romances on the radio, if I'd had one. Then along comes a fellow, one day. . . ."

Effective lullaby, the banal story unwound, with its refrains, its repetitions, its clichés, and always the *ritornello*. "I believed, I swallowed it all."

"They called me Jackie—I was an American type, see, I tinted my hair red, wore high heels. I was a knock-out. But I'm telling you, if a girl's not hard-boiled she's sunk, you've got to be ready to murder your grandmother to get anywhere in this world. What's the good of it all? You tie yourself in knots, you manage to keep going, but it's as hopeless as a cat trying to bark. By the time you've got your little shop and your nice little proper life, you've lost your looks, so what good has it done you? Oh, say you, it's no fun to die of hunger, and I'll say yes to that. But you can always find a comfortable little place. Take me, for instance. . . ."

She had begun on a melancholy note but gaiety suddenly carried her away and she gave Alberte an ignoble wink.

"I'm telling you all this, dearie, because I see you're headed in the same direction. Rigged out to look like a piano teacher, but all the same, you're a girl of the Triangle, ain't you? Well, stop looking like you'd swallowed an umbrella. It don't do you no good. When you get wise to that you can begin to live! That's the way it was with me. I sat around eating my heart out, you'd not believe it. The week before, I'd have given no matter what to dress up, have my own café, a nice clean one, see, and have kids in

school and a hired girl in the kitchen. I'd have married a coloured man, a Chinaman, a one-armed man, no matter what to get out of the hole. Then, one day . . . a week afterwards, I suddenly woke up and it was all over, bang! like that, everything gone and over with. Maybe I'd drunk a drop too much or a drop too little, I can't be sure, but all at once I'd got wise. Why should I work myself up? I was okay here, the old boss leaves me alone, there's not such an awful lot to do except on Saturday, I've got my radio, my own room, and I can take up to my room anyone I like and have a free glass of gin thrown in. What more could you want? Every day you have some excitement and you're left in peace. It's ideal. But now, what about you, Bertha? I'll bet you're in the same fix I was, exactly, and it'll all turn out exactly like it did for me. You don't know what you want, but you want something, you're half dead, like as if the blood in your veins was black ink. Then one of these days you'll wake up like I did. It'll happen in a single night. All of a sudden reputation and love and work—you'll not believe in them any more."

Alberte remained deep in thought. Was this what was devouring her, this culpable weariness and longing for peace, of which the degraded creature was talking? But Alberte loathed, as she had always loathed, the very idea of such collapse, such spineless and willing resignation. Yet the feeling of uneasiness persisted, it had not left her, was merely benumbed, and more than ever she felt the hopeless complexity of life. Was it impossible for her to find peace either in the Triangle or in her father's house? Since the beginning, she had known only those two extremes. . . .

Outside, some children passed. A truck had got stuck in a narrow street and the driver climbed out, cursing. A chattering group of people stopped in front of the tavern, and the loud voice of a guide could be heard proclaiming:

"Here you have the ancient Gallows Tavern. The house dates from the 17th century. On the platform which is still there, are the gallows and the wheel of torture. Along this little gutter flowed the blood of the victims, men and women. Ladies and gentlemen, here you see. . . ."

"Hurray!" the waitress exclaimed, bounding to her feet. "Tourists! Now for the tips! Want to help me out, Bertha? You'll get your share."

"I can't. I have something to do," said Alberte, standing up.

She must see her mother. The Triangle was not enough. She must, by finding Elsa again, with her lies and her aggravating hypocrisy, simultaneously recover her desire to escape them and to react against this inertia. It was with a slight effort that she managed to speak to the waitress familiarly.

"How much do I owe you, Jackie?"

"Not a thing," said the waitress with a laugh. "It's on the house, that round. But if you feel you'd like a job like this, remember I could use you on Saturdays."

The loud voice outside could be heard making a suggestion. "Let us now go into this picturesque tavern. Situated in the heart of the Triangle, the worst section of town. . . ."

Alberte went out, jostling the motley crowd of people loaded down with cameras and all kinds of guide-books, who were jamming the entrance of the tavern. In a second the restaurant was full. The low door shut upon them and Alberte stood on the little market-place, "in the heart of the worst section of town," as the guide had said so proudly. For a moment she stood there motionless. From within the tavern came the clatter of glasses, the sounds of voices exclaiming in Anglo-Saxon. She could hear snatches of what they said, and the voice ceaselessly explaining in English, French, and German, with the laughter of Jackie, the waitress, dominating the tumult.

No, no, that was not life, nor was it truth, either. The memory of a similar commotion came back to her, evenings at the Three Storks, when she had begun to work there. "Can't you try to be a little pleasant, Bertha?" the tavern-keeper had scolded. And her mother had made her hand over the tips, explaining, to the delight of the customers, "I put the money aside for her till she comes of age."

She started to walk in the direction of the clinic. It was not too late to see Elsa. Must take her something, magazines, for instance.

Must listen to the usual story. Must perhaps calm her, but above all, must try to recover balance. After which, return to the house, see Father. He was full of kindness for her, and he was a man who had made of his life that clean, whole, and solid thing that she envied. If he wanted to acknowledge her, why not? Philippe reproached her for something that she did not understand. But it was natural that he should be upset at the prospect of losing that heritage. The brewery would be hers, he had said. In her mind's eye she saw again the long tanks full of foam, the quiet cellars with the pungent odour. . . . She would like to walk there, telling herself that all those things belonged to her. Only the presence of her father had embarrassed her, particularly his feverish excitement. But he, too, was suffering from a malady, and a more serious one than she had thought. She remembered how he had fallen.

"Well, now," said Hélène Franck with satisfaction, "you're going to be very happy, Mademoiselle Damiaen. I had not anticipated such quick results, I'll confess that Madame Damiaen has surpassed my expectations. You will see what splendid progress we are making."

Her cold aloofness had given way to a legitimate pride, the pride of the conjurer who has performed his trick.

Elsa was wearing the same black dress that Alberte had seen on her first visit. But she seemed to have put on a little weight. Her brows were gathered in a frown that gave her face the look of a studious and perhaps rather sly and crafty child. As Alberte said nothing, Dr. Hélène Franck remained for a moment near the door, but then, her professional discretion getting the better of her curiosity, she disappeared.

In this wing of the clinic, the reception room was larger, whiter, more impersonal than the one Alberte had seen in the other one. Certainly there was no question here of a "little club," as Hélène Franck had said. Chairs of nickel and stretched cords, modern looking, a round, low table of glass, upon which had been left a newspaper, walls painted pale yellow, a window of ground glass, like a bathroom window. . . .

"Hello, Bertha," said Elsa in a sedate voice that disconcerted Alberte.

"Hello, Mamma."

"Are you all right, Bertha?"

Of course, that composure was assumed. Alberte knew her mother. She must be waiting for the doctor to be at a sufficient distance, when she would pour out her usual nonsense. Curiously, though Alberte generally feared that moment, she had now almost come to desire it. Elsa talking nonsense was a normal thing, at any rate, and for some time now so few things had been normal.

"I'm quite well, Mamma," she said rather impatiently. "See here, I've brought you some magazines—*Confessions*, *The Home*, and a lot more. I haven't been to see you for such a long time."

Elsa stretched out her hand, then drew it back without taking the magazines.

"Dr. Franck . . . she thinks I oughtn't to read that," she said, with a glance towards the groundglass door.

"Then what does she want you to read?" Reading, as Alberte had found out, was the only way to keep Elsa quiet. "If you don't read and don't drink, I can't imagine what you can do," she said. Then she bit her lips. If Elsa was on the way to being cured, it would be better to encourage her rather than express astonishment. But this woman who did not shout, who was not drunk, and who sat there calmly facing her, but clasping and unclasping her hands, had so little resemblance to her mother!

"What do you do all day long, Mamma?" she went on, in a gentle voice.

To her amazement, she saw Elsa's eyes suddenly light up and Elsa bending towards her, to whisper in a kind of horror, "She talks to me," at the same time casting a fearful glance at the door.

Alberte's feeling of uneasiness returned, like a sudden nausea.

"But surely she doesn't talk to you all day long, Mamma."

"She doesn't stay with me all day long," said Elsa, beneath her breath, "but she comes back all the time."

"Well, for goodness sake, what does she say to you?"

Elsa shrugged.

"You don't need to know that," she said morosely. "You don't tell me what you think, do you? You had some bad thoughts about me, but you never said so."

The feeling of nausea grew, turning into a kind of dizziness. "That's it," she thought, "I'm sick, I must have caught a cold."

"If you don't want to talk about this, Mamma," she said, with an effort, "let's talk about something else. Are you. . . . Do they feed you well here? Do you have a nice room?"

Elsa remained silent for a moment.

"They don't want to let me go out into the garden," she said, then, still in that unnatural whisper. "Do you know why? It's because I slapped the nurse. A very well-bred woman."

"I'd certainly have slapped her myself," said Alberte, speaking intentionally in a loud voice.

But she did not succeed in dispelling her feeling of discomfort, or that nightmare impression of watching a frightful spectacle she could not stop.

"They wish me nothing but good," Elsa muttered. "I hadn't understood. You don't understand everything, here." Then, looking at the floor and without changing the tone of her voice, she said, all of a sudden, "Bertha, when you were a little girl. . . ."

"Yes, Mamma?"

No doubt it would be the old story, the one Alberte knew off by heart: about the park, the Damiaen bank, her abandonment, the sacrifice she had made.

"When you were a little girl," said Elsa slowly, as if reading with difficulty from a printed text, "I didn't love you, Bertha. I didn't love my child. I detested you."

"Mamma!" said Alberte, horrified.

It was a dream, a frightful dream. For a long time everything had been only a dream. Perhaps she was feverish, perhaps she had misunderstood? She must leave, she must summon the nurses.

But the dull voice was still speaking. "You know," Elsa was going on, "all that about the park and the day I wanted to kill myself? That wasn't true. I never went down to the water. I didn't

want to kill myself, Bertha. The day I found out I was going to have a baby, I ate as usual. I remember even the place I went to. I ate, Bertha. Trina was right!" Her voice was thin and low, like the voice of a child who is crying patiently. She covered her face with her hands.

"My parents were not of the nobility, there was no chateau. They didn't drive me out. She's the one that said it. She told me to remember. I didn't want to. You know, those meetings in the park? She said it wasn't true. She said. . . . She said that I am not well-born."

The thin little voice dropped, faltered, rose again, a pitiful, inhuman moan, unreal.

"Say, is that true, Bertha? Is it true? Then nothing, nothing is true?"

The thin hands had parted and Alberte could at last see her mother's face, and on that face she saw her own misgivings, her own shame, that unendurable humiliation she had always believed she was the only one to bear, and which, she now saw, had always been coiled like a snake in Elsa, lulled to quiescence by the childish artifice of a soul too weak to bear it. Obscurely she felt to what extent it had been the hard expression in her own eyes as a little girl that had driven Elsa, more than anything, more than drink or a veritable suffering, ever deeper into that persistent lying. . . . No, she could manage no longer to share this burden which she herself could scarcely bear. . . .

"Mamma," she said hurriedly, "don't listen to them. I'm sure you love me, I'm sure you sacrificed yourself for me!"

The humiliated face was slowly raised.

"But the rain, Bertha? The rain, the river, my parents—all that is true?"

"All that was such a long time ago, Manma! You could very easily have forgotten some of the details, sometimes have made a mistake. It happens to everyone."

Elsa lowered her head again.

"I didn't want to kill myself," she murmured. "I didn't want to kill myself. It was wrong of me not to go away when he asked

me to. I should have done that for you, so as not to do you harm." She paused, and repeated the last phrase intently, "so as not to do you harm." Then, in a woman's voice, a voice Alberte had never heard from her, she let out a little cry: "Oh, my God!"

Alberte could stand no more.

"But Mamma, you're the one that's in the right," she said in a choked voice, trying to speak with enough conviction to efface the poignant look of doubt in Elsa's eyes. "You're the one that's right. . . ."

The groundglass door clicked open, and the coldly gentle voice of the woman doctor called her.

"Mademoiselle Daniaen! Would you be so kind as to step into my office?"

Mechanically Alberte glanced at her wrist.

"But the visiting hour," she began, without quite knowing what she said.

"The time is of little importance," said the austere voice. "I would like to have a word with you."

Alberte looked at her mother. But Elsa, with eyes down, had begun again to clasp and unclasp her hands. Alberte stood up and went into the adjacent room. Without being invited to, she let herself sink into the tickelled armchair. She still had that feeling of dizziness. From behind her desk, Dr. Hélène Franck looked severely at her.

"My child, I understand your emotion, your feelings. But they are carrying you too far. Restrain yourself, I beg of you! Besides, I'm guilty in this; I should not have authorized this visit. I had confidence in you, I thought you were sufficiently well balanced to co-operate in our effort. Some neuroses are persistent. We are trying to eradicate your mother's. Thank God, we've not had to deal with a veritable psychosis, but only with a half-feigned insanity, clearly facilitated by an over-indulgence in alcohol. She had always more or less known of the inexistence of her myths, you see, but they had ended up by acquiring a kind of substance. It's not surprising that, having to struggle against years of this sort of mental intoxication, she should emerge from the struggle rather

exhausted. You will see what I mean. Let's take the example of——"

"I don't want to take any example!" said Alberte with futile wrath. "I don't want her to be made unhappy! Let them stop her drinking, well and good. But——"

"Our duty," said Hélène Franck, taking off her glasses and gravely staring at the girl, "is to relieve her mind as well as her body. If the patient suffers from mental troubles, aside from organic troubles brought on by alcoholism, I consider it useful——"

"To make her suffer still more?" said Alberte. She had not realized she was shouting, but something in the little office tinkled in a 'strange way. She lowered her voice: "To keep telling her all day long that she detests me, that she's a bad mother, that——"

"To confront her with her responsibilities," said Hélène Franck gently. "To teach her to surmount them like a human being. No doubt you love your mother, Mademoiselle Damiaen, but I doubt that she loves you. You are her remorse, understand, her first fall into sin—I'm not talking of morality, I'm talking as she thinks, obscurely—her first fall into sin. You are the fruit. As to her subsequent sins, you were the witness, the unconscious reproach. And to rid herself of that unconscious reproach—we have succeeded in clearing the ground to the point where she recognizes that fact—she handed you over, in exchange for a sum of money, to your father, against whom she held an unreasonable grudge. In her language, and according to her limited way of reasoning, she "sold" you. Thus she accumulated remorse upon remorse, with the consequent need of compensation through alcoholism, mythomania, obsession, and near insanity."

All this became mixed up in Alberte's mind: Elsa was insane, was no longer insane, was wrong, was right. . . . She knew only one thing, now, and that was the horror she had felt at seeing her own malaise, her own deep shame reflected, as in a mirror, on the face of her mother.

"I won't have it," she said, heatedly. "I won't have it. I'll speak of this to my father."

She had thought of herself as still proud and upright, but as she spoke, she had bent down and clasped her hands, and her imploring voice had come to mingle with all the imploring voices that had succeeded each other in that little office.

"Don't let yourself go, like this, Mademoiselle Damiaen. (To Alberte's ears the doctor's words came from a great distance). Your father would approve my speaking to you like this. Try to realize once for all that when your mother shall have renounced her phantasies, her remorse will follow, her rancour against your father will disappear, and she will comprehend her errors and be able to start a new life."

"A new life?" said Alberte, bewildered. "But how is that possible? When you succeed in making her believe that everything is her own fault, why, what can she do? She is old, she doesn't know how to do anything! How could she begin a new life! What will she do, when you have taken everything away from her?"

The cameo face of H  l  ne Franck took on a very hard look.

"She will know the truth," she said curtly. "She will be cured."

"But I don't want . . ." Again the invisible object in the room vibrated at the sound of Alberte's voice.

"She will know the truth," H  l  ne Franck repeated drily, "and she will be cured. It's too late to envisage the thing from another point of view. You gave me your authorization, your father gave me his authorization to apply to your mother the therapy I considered required, and I have taken the responsibility for that sick woman. I'll not admit—"

Alberte flung the outside door open with such violence that a pane of glass fell out, shattering into a thousand sparkling fragments on the floor. Pensively, the woman doctor stared at them. . . .

Almost immediately the door to the waiting room opened and the irrepressible Nurse L  aucourt darted into the office, her little black eyes sparkling with curiosity.●

"I took the patient back to her room," she said, "and then I heard someone screaming." Only then did she pretend to notice the broken pane of glass. "Oh!" she exclaimed loudly. "What's happened? I hope you've not hurt yourself? Oh, my God! This is surely the first time——"

"Come, now, Léaucourt," said Hélène Franck calmly, "don't excite yourself. It's merely that young Damiacn girl—she opened the door rather abruptly."

"That girl's crazier than her mother!" the nurse exclaimed. "Fit to be tied, that's what I thought when I first laid eyes on her. And the way she shouts! She's a wild beast!"

"A wild beast who is perhaps going to inherit her father's fortune, from what I hear," remarked Hélène Franck.

"You don't say! God forbid! The father's crazy, too, then? And if she killed him to inherit the fortune sooner? You know, there've been cases like that——"

"My poor Léaucourt, how fond you are of tragedies! Please sweep up that broken glass, and hurry. We have other things to do. Yes, that girl is rather emotional. You would think she didn't realize that she was the one, after all, who requested an internment—which was, moreover, indispensable. These hereditary alcoholics produce strange results, sometimes. That girl, in appearance, is as robust as the father, yet. . . . Well, Léaucourt, are we getting to work?"

She gave the nurse one of her rare smiles. The nurse, with pathetic exclamations, was amusing and diverting. "What will remain to her," the girl had said, "when you have taken everything away?" An interesting question, if the girl had only known it. Insane people generally did lose a great deal of their originality, once they were cured. Faculties which scarcely seemed to have any connection with their psychosis disappeared as if, in the scraping of the surface, the rake had gone too deep and had torn out their very soul. "What will remain to her?" the girl had asked. But what remained to most of the patients that were cured and left the hospital at the age of fifty, homeless, jobless, forgotten by their families, rejected even by the very malady that had become almost

like a friend to them? "If we asked ourselves such questions, we'd stop curing people," she told herself.

"Well," she said aloud teasingly, "so you had a real fright, Léaucourt?" And with the nurse beside her, she crossed the court which separated the two departments.

Chapter Twenty - Five

IN the 17th-century house where Clara lived, the bedroom of irregular shape was lined with mirrors. Clara was lying on her bed, wearing a lace negligée that revealed her long, well-muscled legs and concealed her breasts that had been tightened up by plastic surgery several times. "An inanimate object," thought Philippe, "she looks like a simple object when she's asleep." He raised his eyes and saw his image reflected ten times, his pale and slender, boyish-looking body, ageless and insignificant. Beside him, Clara was breathing regularly, her calm face showing a few almost imperceptible wrinkles, a face that did not quiver, as though in sleep she maintained the same self-control that made her waking days a set routine of exercises and self-denials not unworthy of a jockey. Her long, well-manicured hands rested upon her breast, her feet were joined. Her short hair, daringly tinted silver grey, curled over her proud straight brow. Awake, that forehead had a wrinkle of anxiety; but she slept calmly, without that greedy appetite some women have for sleep, as though they were savouring every least breath of air; her sleep was the rigorous and sober sleep of an athlete.

"Another one," reflected Philippe ironically, "who boasts of having faith in life. Life! For her it's masseurs, diets, pots of cold cream and the pleasure of telling herself that I'm ten years younger than she is. Why not?" He liked to see her, with a terrible preciseness, go through her gymnastic exercises, weigh herself on a little scale, fight against putting on the least ounce, calculate what dresses to wear and doing all this with the same lack of excitement a

prisoner brings to calculating the length of rope that will enable him to escape. "Only, she knows that she'll end up by breaking her neck." It was her courage that he loved, and that way she had of exposing her wound to the light of day for all eyes to see. Those visits she undertook several times a week, going the rounds of her circle of acquaintances for whom she did not care at all, what was it but another parade, a way of saying, "I, the beautiful Madame Cassini, a rich woman who has had three husbands and dozens of lovers and who, according to everyone, is fifty years old, still manage to be more beautiful than anyone"? If such were not the case, why, with all the money she had and her refined tastes and natural elegance, why did she remain stuck in this gossipy little town? She could have cut a dash as the elegant woman travelling alone on Blue Trains, could have been the enchantment of the messengers in luxury hotels, or have been the barely glimpsed elegant figure aboard an ocean liner—barely glimpsed but forever afterward embedded like a sharp arrow in the heart of a sixteen years old boy, future notary who, for six months would believe himself to be a poet. . . . But no, she must remain there, fighting to the end, must remain in the arena, accepting even her defeat. She felt impelled to cling, as they all managed to cling, to this smooth surface that was life. As Klaes hung on, with desperate and almost pitiful eagerness.

In that spurious feeling of peace that follows even the most deplorable amours, Philippe thought of the old fellow with a kind of remote pity. What hectic excitement he had displayed that morning, during the visit to the brewery! Yet what pleasure could anyone take in seeing his life transformed into machines, into nuts and bolts? The idea that they will survive you? And that absurd habit Klaes had of surrounding himself with a crowd of more or less useless parasites—of which Philippe was, moreover, one? Of what use would they be a few months later, when Klaes would be dead? Of what use would Clara's gymnastic exercises be to her when she was sixty? "She'll always be able to afford the luxury of gigolos." But she was not that much in love with love, just as old Klaes was not all that in love with money. Love and money

were merely the pretexts they gave themselves to nang on and not to slip off this desperately smooth surface. At any rate Philippe himself did not go in for those ridiculous performances. He was already down there, away down there, watching these others perform, his amusement occasionally mingled with some commiseration.

"What a blessing to be poor!" Philippe reflected. "That's the best pretext in the world. Clara and Klaes are amateurs. Beauty and money, when one has them, admiration, and even the love Simone is always talking about—those things don't last. The minute you stop to think, you let go and slide. And down you fall from a height! But an empty stomach, screaming kids, an empty coal cellar—that represents something solid. You don't argue with your stomach, you fill it. And you must keep on filling it. Hunger is an admirable machine. As soon as you aren't hungry, there come the pretexts, the lies—and metaphysics. God, the opium of the rich. True, some appetites are heartier than others. Klaes is still hanging on sufficiently hard, with his urge to absorb Alberte. If I'd known how to play the game and show a virtuous contempt for his success, let him suspect that there's something else on earth—for that's exactly what she's doing, persuading him, as the women's magazines put it, that there are things that can't be bought—I'd already be at the head of his factories. But she has a technique, too, that girl. . . ." A damned fine technique, even, since she had succeeded, that very noon, in working Philippe himself into a frenzy. He was still amazed at the memory of the way he had suddenly been overwhelmed with anger and desire. "I certainly owe her something, if only for that. If she succeeds, she will certainly have deserved it. And if we succeed, I'll provide for her." He mused for a while upon that thought. "Well, well, perhaps I, too, am going to find something to hang on to for a little while. In the long run, that girl Alberte is useful to everyone." And suppose he was mistaken? Suppose the astonishment and disinterestedness she affected turned out to be real? "That would be too funny!" But was it not exactly this idea which had so irritated him that afternoon?

In the next room, the telephone rang. He hesitated, then at last

got up. He had not left his number with anyone except Madame Nuñez. Could it be. . . ?

"Aunt Odilia?" . . . "He's caught them?" . . . "Thanks to you, bravo! A heart attack? Yes, a faint? That could be dangerous." . . . "No, call Dr. Franck instead. If he came to. . . ." "Yes, people are so mean. What about the secretary?" . . . "He's run away? We could have expected that." . . . "It's good riddance." . . . "You think it's of any use? Very well, I'll come."

Returning to the bedroom, he remarked once more how ridiculous it was to see himself multiplied by ten as he pulled on his trousers. He must tell Clara to get rid of these mirrors. True, she probably attached some value to them, as a symbol and a challenge. Always the symbol, what a bore!

In the doorway he paused, hesitating over whether or not to bid her goodbye. No. It would have been criminal to disturb such methodical sleep. And then, what would they have had to say to each other?

Chapter Twenty - Six

THE three children standing on the other side of the boat basin went on persistently singing, despite Suzanne's efforts to stop them. In vain she had gone several times to tell them that the brewer was very ill, and that he did not want to see anyone. They remained there, banging with pretended ardour on their saucepans and singing the traditional song. One of the children had managed to find a harmonica, and the two youngest ones bawled in their hoarse little voices the song of The Three Kings:

Three eastern Kings of note,
Three eastern Kings of note,
Have come here together
To beg for a groat.

The only way to get rid of them would be to give them the traditional small coins and some gingerbread-men. But Madame Nuñez and her son Roger were shut off in the study with Philippe, Yves had disappeared, the brewer was refusing to see anyone except Dr. Franck, and Alberte was in bed, so to whom could Suzanne appeal? And the children continued their wearisome din, puffs of vapour coming from their little mouths along with that old, old song.

They were children of the Triangle, long trained to music: their uncle was the "orchestra-man" and all three of them must hope, one day, to replace him. While waiting, they were practising their trade as street-singers, on the eve of Twelfth Night, with admirable perseverance. The eldest, blackened with soot, represented King

Balthazar, and had managed to find an old bowler hat, which he proudly wore, holding his chin up, although the hat came down over his eyes. The other two were vaguely draped in purple rags. They were cold, and they stamped up and down to keep warm, banging on their saucepans louder and louder, singing. And their noses and hands and lips became blue with the cold, but they kept on, sustained by the absurd hope that the brewer, sick as he was, would finally come out and recompense them more liberally than all the other years for having so well celebrated the day of The Three Kings.

"My God! What a noise those little ragamuffins are making!" said Madame Nuñez. "These absurd customs ought to be forbidden."

"It's what the tourists like," said Roger, without conviction.

Dr. Franck had just entered the house, and although he had seen them at the window, he had not bowed. Roger was troubled: had old Klaes complained to Dr. Franck of having been kept in ignorance of his condition? Once more Roger was taking up his interminable indictment, as he did every evening with Erna's trusting eyes upon him. He had only done what any affectionate relative would have done, he had wanted to avoid submitting his uncle's weakened heart to shocks. He had given him sedatives, the only possible therapy for angina pectoris. He had prolonged as much as he could the old man's life. Well then, what did they reproach him for? Why had Dr. Franck not bowed to him? Of what use would it have been to the old man to know that he would not get well? "My conscience is clear," Roger told himself with a semblance of force. But he wondered if Dr. Franck, who was none too easy on his young colleagues, would not talk about it at the Adriatic Club, completely discrediting him? If only they came into the fortune! But that was now doubtful, for would not Uncle Klaes, brutally disillusioned, hold such a grudge against him that he would disinherit the lot of them? Evidently, Alberte's conduct must have shocked him. Aloud he asked: "What did Uncle Klaes say, when he saw them?"

"I noticed the reflection of Alberte's lamp on the terrace," said

Madame Nuñez smugly. "I immediately had a presentiment that something was happening, so I went to listen on the landing, where I heard a kind of whispering. So I risked everything, went to wake Klaes, told him there was a burglar, made him go downstairs. One of the steps squeaked, but we caught a good view of the young fellow leaving Alberte's room."

"Did Uncle bawl him out?" asked Philippe.

"Why, no. That was what scared me. He didn't say a word, and he was breathing so queerly, with a kind of noise. . . . The young fellow was terrified, as you can imagine. And then Alberte came out in her nightgown."

"Very eighteenth century," sneered Philippe. "Aha, miserable girl! You betray my trust!"

"Will you stop joking?" said Madame Nuñez shortly. "It's your fault that we've got into this mess, and God knows how it's going to turn out! He's still not asked to see us. Dr. Franck must have——"

"When will you stop talking about Dr. Franck!" groaned Roger, his nerves at the breaking point.

"I'm just telling the plain facts," said Madame Nuñez, with a shrug. "Anyway, that was another idea of Philippe's, not to tell him anything. To make a long story short, Klaes didn't say a word. He fell right down in a faint. Well, I thought since he'd already had a fainting fit in the morning that this was the . . . the end, and I thought I was doing the right thing to call. . . ."

A piece of Dresden china shattered on the floor, thrown violently by Roger. Madame Nuñez stopped talking.

Outside, the noise had been interrupted for a moment. The "orchestra-man" had suddenly appeared on the other side of the boat basin, and the children were running towards him. The sunlight glittered on a kind of monument placed on his head, his walk was slow, as if painful, hampered as he was by the bells and cymbals attached to his knees and ankles.

"Ah, here come some reinforcements," said Philippe, wearily amused.

Madame Nuñez let out a groan. Roger turned his back on the

window, below which the orchestra-man and the three children were now standing, surrounded by the children who had come out of the houses to hear them.

"Maybe we ought to give them something, even so?" Madame Nuñez asked idly.

"Too late," said Philippe, "look's what's happening."

Some tourists in garish shirts had just disembarked from a motor launch and were lavishly distributing glittering coins to the children. The orchestra-man had begun to dance. Automatically the three people in the study drew nearer the window.

The noise was simply infernal, now. The orchestra-man was rather young, with reddish pointed beard and hair that was long. On his back he carried a small barrel organ, which he worked with his left hand, while his right hand manipulated a pair of castanets. His bending knees jangled the cymbals that were attached by coarse chains, which gave him the look of a tortured convict. Indeed, everything about this heavy and awkward dance which was as ponderous as the movements of a dancing bear, took on the aspect of weird torment, from the slow bending of those knees and the feverish movements of the hands to the painful shaking of the head, twitching as if spasmodically under the weight of the enormous royal crown studded with fake gems and bristling with little bells. The children accompanied their uncle with the loud banging of saucepans and seemed to be greatly enjoying themselves. The tourists showed their appreciation by throwing coins into the empty can which the black-faced Balthazar held out to them. But the orchestra-man's expression remained sombre, his eyes stared straight ahead, and Philippe felt they were fixed upon him. However, this macabre atmosphere of waiting was bound to make them all nervous. He himself did not feel up to the mark and could not even bring himself to reflect seriously upon what was going to take place.

The sitting-room door opened and Dr. Franck's Beethovenian head appeared, his grey hair thrust back.

"Monsieur van Baarnheim asks to be left undisturbed," he said rather shortly, without addressing himself to anyone in particular.

"A rather serious attack. Infraction of the myocardium. A strong emotion could. . . . But aside from that, he is in no immediate danger."

He shut the door. Roger bounded to his feet, exclaiming almost hysterically, "You see? You see? He didn't even speak to me. He knew I was here and had attended the invalid. Between colleagues. . . . But these hospital physicians are all the same. Pretentious nonentities!"

His voice broke in the silence that had suddenly fallen. His mother was not even looking at him. He began to pace the floor like a vicious and bewildered and unhappy animal. Philippe pressed his forehead against the window-pane.

The orchestra-man was again dancing, the heavy crown bounced up and down above his crucified face. "At this minute," Philippe reflected, "everything's at stake. Alberte's destiny, ours, and even, in a sense, the destiny of Klaes. Will Alberte become again what she was destined to be, a simple barmaid or even worse, perhaps—for that young Sarfati fellow will abandon her, surely? Will Aunt Odilia die of bitterness and disappointment, or will she queen it on the Riviera in the midst of all those old female bridge-players? Will Roger become our great physician, eclipsing the poor devil of a Dr. Franck, or will he be obliged to leave town and bury himself in some out of the way place to brood over this absurd affair to the end of his days? Will Klaes die in peace? Will I. . . .?" But what would change for him? If he succeeded to his share of the fortune, it would mean an easier life; Louise would get married, he and Clara would go for a boring cruise, perhaps, Simone would continue to torment herself, and the factory machinery would continue to turn. If he did not come into his part of the fortune, he would have to restrict his way of life a little, hope for a lucky break on the stock-market, get back to work in his firm, which he had seriously neglected of late. Louise would be harder to marry off, and Simone would be a little unhappier; but nothing would really change. Sometimes he had the feeling that nothing would ever change for him. Even death, he reflected, did not make him really afraid. Klaes, upstairs, must be struggling,

now, against death. Perhaps it would be good, one day, to know that supreme agony? Yet, no. In all likelihood it was overrated, was probably similar to that absurd little moment of anguished expectancy that precedes an orgasm, as if a miracle, all at once, was about to occur, and then, you probably sank into death, disappointed, as if beside the body of a stranger from whom you had expected only God knows what.

He turned away from the window. All of a sudden, that dance seemed to be oddly in harmony with his thoughts. That man who was slowly moving beneath that quantity of little bells that were emitting joyous and jangly sounds, who was thinking of something else as he danced, staring straight ahead with eyes empty of hope, resembled him in a certain way. That man also, thought Philippe, remembering his night thoughts, must not cling too much to life. He, too, in an obscure way, must realize the absurdity of his existence, the absurdity of the amount of skill expended to make the cracked bells tinkle and the cymbals clang. "Another symbol! Quite a harvest!" But like all symbols, this one was totally devoid of significance.

A house-bell sounded. They became all attention. Suzanne could be heard bounding up the stairs.

"What in the world can it be?" muttered Madame Nuñez.

"He's asking for me," said Roger, agitatedly, "surely, he's asking for me."

But Suzanne was coming downstairs more slowly, and through the door she shouted as she passed, "He wants us to give the gingerbread-men to the children, that's all."

They exchanged glances. Outside, the uproar suddenly stopped. The children, followed by the orchestra-man, were going towards the service entrance, where Suzanne would distribute the traditional presents. Then they went away, along the boat basin. The orchestra-man had unfastened the cymbals, which he was carrying under one arm, and he, too, was biting eagerly into the gingerbread. Philippe, who had irresistibly been drawn back to the window, could not find a trace of the Christ-like expression that had so impressed him. The man had a young face, a little weary, but with

almost infantile pleasure now depicted upon it, and he was hungrily biting into the gingerbread-king that had been given him. Silence returned.

"My goodness," said Madame Nuñez, "Klaes will surely ask for one of us. When you're on the point of death——"

"Yes," said Philippe. "He's not respecting the rules of politeness. If he lets himself die all alone, without fuss——"

"He hasn't made a will," said Madame Nuñez. "That simplifies everything. We should have asked Dr. Franck if it was apt to happen in the course of the day."

The clocks were striking the noon hour when Suzanne came to knock at the study door.

"Monsieur Brenner, your wife is on the telephone. She wants to know if——"

"Tell her we know nothing yet, Suzanne."

"Would you like to eat, sir? I told the cook to prepare a meal for three."

"What about Mademoiselle Alberte?"

"She said she'd not have lunch, sir. And Monsieur Sarfati came this morning, not wanting to bother anyone, to pack his things. Is there anything you would like?"

"That will do, Suzanne," said Madame Nuñez majestically. "We will have luncheon."

They went in to table. Suzanne served, no longer daring to ask questions, but her eyes were red.

"Where in the world," Philippe asked himself, "did the girl find tears to shed for that old tyrant who used her as he would a spittoon, and with as much consideration? Or is it merely the affectation of simple folk who adopt a ritual attitude in all circumstances? Or is she regretting the loss of her small earnings? Or has there really been something like a human exchange between that demanding, disagreeable old man and this little greedy-goose, after all?"

The prevailing atmosphere was one of consternation. Even Madame Nuñez, while devouring her food with appetite, had adopted a strained attitude. Roger's bovine forehead was bent

over his plate and he was still ruminating upon Dr. Franck's behaviour. The servants, utterly forlorn, were cluttered in the hall outside.

As the table was cleared, Suzanne brought another message.

"Monsieur Brenner," she said, "it's your wife again on the telephone."

"She can go to the devil," said Philippe, exasperatedly. "We're not waiting for a child to be born, after all, good God!"

He stopped abruptly, aware of the indignant look in the young maidservant's eyes, and they returned to the study, this time leaving the door open to catch the least sound. But there was a complete silence. What could Klaes van Baarnheim be doing alone there in his room, unable to move, he, too, waiting for something that was like a birth. . . .

Outside, people were passing, their heads swathed in mufflers, their coat collars up, casting envious glances through the window-panes into the warm study where a lamp had been lit. Beside the canals, motor cars must still be moving, but the Triangle withdrew behind its shutters that were closed in broad daylight. Time passed. Madame Nuñez worked out a game of patience. Neighbours came to rap at the kitchen window, asking for news, going in for a cup of coffee. A nurse, sent in by Dr. Franck and whom the brewer refused to see, was reading magazines in the dining-room. In the town, carriages were drawing up before the ornamental Louis XV pastry shops where the chandeliers were already being lit, and ladies with fur muffs were getting out of them, uttering little shrieks when their feet sank for a second into the snow. In the country, children bundled up like parcels of clothes from which only their round red faces emerged, were racing over the ice, their wooden skates creaking near the motionless windmills. But in the farm kitchens with flagstoned floors they were hanging heavy curtains at the windows—quilted and lined with swansdown or lined with newspaper—which turned the rooms into something resembling caverns, dark and warm. Everywhere people were shutting themselves in, every minute crack was being stopped. With a few more days of freezing temperatures, the town of A

would become that fortified city, blind and mute, which the old Flemish painters loved so well. Even the church bells could now almost not be heard from a distance, sounding as if through a fog or a light sleep.

Slowly, intently, the old man breathed. It was, so it seemed to him, at the cost of a great effort that he managed to swell his dried old leathery chest and fill his painfully wheezing lungs with air. Slowly, then, he let out again the precious and foul-smelling air, slowly, slowly, to breathe in anew, quickly, with avidity filling himself again with life. From time to time, when he had barely exhaled, he was seized with such a need for air that he inhaled too quickly, choking on that air which seemed to him as palpable and desirable as water. Then he suffocated, his heart knocking violently against his ribs, his veins swelling, his brain suddenly flooded with formless agonies. And yet, despite the exhausting and constant effort of capturing that life as thin and tenuous as a trickle of air, his mind still existed, and his thoughts were ranging hurriedly over imaginary warehouses full of useless harvests, dusty stores of goods, brushing aside soiled and revelled desires, projects thrown to the ground like tall broken pillars, and in that disorder, suddenly, his thoughts were searching, discarding figures and notes, rummaging, breaking, seeking again, seeking the key that would forever liberate him from this labyrinth whose paths were known only to him. He must live until then. Obstinate, he continued to inhale and exhale, forcing himself to follow the rhythm of his suffering; in a while, when he should have recovered his strength a little, he would still have an affair to settle.

Downstairs the waiting became unendurable.

"For Heaven's sake, what's he doing?" Madame Nuñez raged. "No matter how ill he is, he could have had her told to pack her bags. He was well enough to have the gingerbread distributed."

"I wonder. . . ?" Philippe murmured.

He did not finish his sentence. It was useless to disturb them for nothing. They would see. But he wondered if he had not been

mistaken in his calculations. Had Klaes been feeling well, or supposing himself to be well, he would have driven Alberte away in a great outburst of wrath. But a Klaes who knew he was dying might not have the same reaction.

"Hasn't Alberte left her room?" he asked aloud.

"Suzanne would have told me if she had. Are you afraid of something?"

"I'm afraid of nothing at all. Like you, I'm waiting."

"And to think," said Roger involuntarily, "that one single strong emotion would be enough——"

"Well?" Philippe nervously interrupted. "You surely don't want me to burst into the room and yell, 'War's been declared!' to give him a shock?"

He wondered what Alberte was doing. She must be in despair. For a moment he considered going, against all the conventions, to knock at her door. Then he recalled his inexplicable anger of the night before, recalled the girl's face, her silence. No, it would risk spoiling everything. "But to think, she almost moved me to tears! And that very night she admitted her lover to her bedroom! There's no denying it, she has a gift. It's between us two, now."

They continued to wait.

"Thank you, Nurse," said Klaes, as the woman put away the hypodermic. "Those shots relieve me a great deal."

His voice was calm, his breathing not so laboured.

"No, I assure you, I prefer to remain alone," he said in answer to the nurse's query. "I'll ring for you if. . . . In any case, Dr. Franck is coming back this evening, isn't he?"

In the mirror on the opposite wall, if he sat up, he could see the waxy pallor of a face that no longer, now, belonged to him.

"You really don't want anyone?" asked Nurse Mathilde, a shrewd fat woman, middle-aged. "Sometimes we need company."

"I need to reflect," said Klaes in an unanswerable tone.

She went out.

With his body relieved, the wave of hatred that had shaken and submerged him the night before overwhelmed him anew. That

he; Klaes van Baarnheim, could be swindled right under his own roof! He had striven for weeks to win that heart—suddenly he saw this clearly—and had thought it shut against him upon some mysterious secret, had all at once discovered that it hid only the most paltry betrayal! She was in love! He was none too sure what carried him away more, whether anger or relief. God only knew what he had got into his head. He himself would probably never know.

“The little fool!” he muttered again, with something like hate.

She had betrayed him, she had shamefully duped him. In times other than these, she would already have been kicked out. And yet. . . . In the midst of his exhausting suffocation he had been able to read Dr. Franck’s face; and in the past he recalled certain expressions, certain equivocal replies. They, too, had betrayed him. No matter what, he would never forgive his sister for having been first to discover the derisive secret which had disquieted him, as one becomes disquieted at night over the least things which seem then to be endowed with secret powers and which only daylight can restore to their natural and inoffensive appearance. (As to Madame Nuñez’s tale of a burglar, he believed not the least word of it). Nor could he forgive Roger for having—even out of goodness of heart—stolen his death from him. Yet, for a moment, confronting the silence and the expression on Dr. Franck’s face, he had felt oppressed by the truth that had suddenly emerged. But his character had soon got the better of that feeling. If he had to die, then at least let his death belong to him! He would rule over the least parcel of this final domain. He was not a child; and so many years of trickery and pride had prepared him to struggle even against his last hour. Now he had found, by turning slightly on his side, the way to breathe. He managed to congratulate himself, “Good, it can hold out still a few hours”—as he had rejoiced in other days over the stocks in his store-house that would allow him to hold out against a strike. Only his anger continued to mount, from time to time, in a red tide that obscured his mind and hastened his heartbeats. “That girl! And he dared to! Under my roof!” It was the only thing that still kept him from summoning his daughter. “Oh, if

only I had ten years ahead of me!" How he would have driven her off, how he would have humiliated her, crushed her with his indignation, made her feel the extent of her ingratitude! But those others, too, those others who were waiting downstairs, how he would have crushed them, as well! He would have found other people, begun something else. He had never been cast down utterly by a defeat. But he must not think of this now, there wasn't time. He must use what means he had at hand. "Forget sentiment. Business is business," he repeated to himself. He needed Alberte. The rest must not count.

"The way I see it now, we shouldn't have done what we did," said Madame Nuñez nervously. "It's your fault, Philippe. As a matter of fact, what you wanted was to frighten her, in order to take advantage of her, and you hadn't realized that you risked, in this little game, making us lose our fortune!"

"That doesn't make sense," Philippe said curtly, with a shrug.

"Oh yes it does," shrieked Madame Nuñez, beside herself. "I see through your game, now. Yesterday you were whispering with her for hours in the corridor. You'd like nothing better than to take sides with her against us, there's the truth of the matter!"

She was checked by a sound of footsteps descending the stairs. It was Suzanne, going down the corridor, without even deigning to pause, as she called out to them through the study door that had remained open, speaking too loudly, too theatrically, "He's asking for Mademoiselle Alberte!"

Then they could hear a parley outside Alberte's bedroom door. Madame Nuñez' arm, still dramatically raised to emphasize her torrent of abuse, fell heavily to her side. They waited. Alberte's step could be heard now. She was running quickly past and without seeing them. She was climbing the stairs.

"Either he will throw her out in a great outburst of rage," thought Philippe, "or he'll acknowledge her. There's no other solution." Was she going to come downstairs triumphant, or vanquished? Even then, he was not sure if the result was of any real importance to him. What he wanted, with almost painful

intensity, was to see her face when she came down those stairs. "Vanquished, she's mine." Of that, he was sure. But why, vaguely, did he have the impression that, triumphant, she would also belong to him, in a way?

"Why, what can he be saying to her? What can he be saying to her?" muttered Madame Nuñez ragefully, clenching her plump little hands.

Roger said nothing. It was certain that, more than anything else, he was preoccupied with wondering whether, in a little while, Dr. Franck would deign to address a few words to him.

They were to wait another ten minutes or so for the moment when they would hear a very slow step on the stairs, would see, Alberte go by towards the telephone in the hall, hear her pick up the receiver, and eventually demand in a trembling voice, "The Notary Zimmerman, if you please?"

O matrons who washed the child Alberte in that wooden tub, O shrewd and expert women, rich in peasant experience, makers and breakers of marriages, midwives with hands soaked in blood, hired mourners wrapping corpses in winding sheets, did you not predict it? With the artless emphasis of village wise-women, you said, "Sooner or later, blood will tell." You, O matrons, are acquainted with the death-agony, with the dying one's difficult passage through it, groping and hesitating like a child making its way into the world through the torn viscera and appearing at last, in a cry of deliverance. Flemish matrons, stranglers of hens and rabbits, you know what glimmers in the depths even of the eye of an animal that scents death, the hen strung up by its feet against the whitewashed wall of the courtyard, its blood flowing out drop by drop, the pig that feels the sharp edge of the knife on its vein. You know that the dying man does not escape from that night of clawing branches, that menacing forest through which he blindly struggles, except with a companion. The companion's name or face are of little import to that blind man lost in the forest; the companion is the one who sees, who continues on the way. To the very end, the sound of that companion's footsteps will make the

dying one believe that his heart continues to beat. There, where intelligence busily planned, you would have known at once, O circumscribed and wise women, that there was nothing more to be done. Dying, the old brewer must grasp the hand of the only one that could accompany him: Alberte.

For a good minute he looked at her wrathfully. Then, with superhuman effort, he controlled himself. He even noticed that she had put on her simplest dress, the one she used to wear every day, and not one of the dresses he had given her recently. She was quite evidently expecting to be cast out. This apparent submission ended up by calming him.

"Yesterday," he said ponderously, "I took you to see the plant. There's the brewery, the house, two buildings in town—Maalens will give you the details—and Philippe handles my investments. That accounts for all my property. I give a certain sum of money each year to Dr. Franck's clinic—and another sum to Mademoiselle Paule to be distributed for the best. You'll see the figures, and you will carry on."

She had raised her head, stupefied, not comprehending.

"You will keep the servants. Dolls, the manager, will ably take care of the enlargements to be made at the plant, he's an honest man. You must keep Philippe, you'll not be able to manage without him. But keep an eye on him. Now, let's drop this and talk about that affair of last night." He remained silent awhile, swallowing once more a wave of wrath. "He's your lover? I wasn't mistaken? Good. I see now why you were embarrassed at taking advantage of what I offered you! All the same, you were conscious of your ingratitude. But let's forget that. What do you intend to do with him?"

She remained silent. Since the night before, so many things had happened, one after the other! That visit to the brewery, Philippe's whispered words, the Triangle, the visit to her mother, her return to the house. . . . She had not been able to refrain from letting Yves into her room. Close to him at least she could recover her lost stability and equilibrium. He, who so easily became upset,

could he not help her to understand her own troubles, which remained incomprehensible to her? But Yves had scolded her. He had said "Just when everything's going well, you lose your head! If you want to say you've had enough of me, say it, but don't go on with these idiotic pretexts of yours. At last he intends to acknowledge you, anyone can see it. And you tell me your mother's better. Well, what more do you want? Really, Alberte, tell me if you have something against me?" He had no more understood this malaise that was devouring her than she understood it. He must have raised his voice. That was what had alerted Madame Nuñez. Then there had been her father coming down the stairs, Yves fleeing—she had had time only to whisper to him, "Tomorrow night, in the tool-shed"—the questions that continued to go round in her head, and now this fortune which was so suddenly offered her—or rather, imposed upon her. She said nothing.

Klaes thought he understood this silence. "She has the whip hand," he thought, "and she knows it. She will lay down her conditions. After all, she's my daughter." He capitulated.

"You want to marry him?"

"Yes," she said. She could at least reply to that. Almost with a feeling of relief, she waited for his outburst of wrath. But he merely sighed.

"All right, so be it. You stick to your opinions, don't you? Oh, oh! Once you get an idea into your head! Very well, marry him. You see that I want your happiness, that I don't hold out against you? Aren't you going to thank me?"

"Yes, Father," she stammered, a little distraught. She could understand nothing any more, nothing, nothing.

"With some care, you'll manage to hold him," he went on in a jovial tone of complicity. "Fundamentally, it's not such a bad match. You'll do what you want, and you'll have enough money for two. You'll have to take precautions with the marriage contract, for example. But I'll live long enough to oversee that. Yes. Everything will be in order. . . ."

For a moment, his eyes wandered, then returned to her.

"Go telephone to Zimmerman, the notary. Tell him to be here

at six o'clock. That gives him an hour to draw up a document, a paper, in short, what's needed. Tell him what it's about."

She left the room, still without saying a word. But the brewer was not worried. For the first time in a very long time, he was enjoying a kind of relief, an impression of buoyancy, as if he had laid down a heavy load, and he felt a kind of peace.

Chapter Twenty - Seven

THE notary had been shown into the bedroom. Propped up among his pillows, Klaes van Baarnheim waited, his yellow eyes strangely brilliant in his haggard old lion face.

"Oh, oh, you're late!" he said as Alberte entered, in the wake of the notary. "I said six o'clock, Alberte!"

"The terrible exactitude of a big business man!" said the notary, with a smile. "It's barely five minutes past."

He had a fine baritone voice and an imposing chest swelled beneath his pearl grey waistcoat.

"Mademoiselle, I am very glad to make your acquaintance."

She grasped the extended hand.

"See to having a glass of beer brought up for Maître Zimmerman, Alberte."

Maître Zimmerman eagerly accepted the beer. He was delighted to witness as interesting a scene as this. The whole town was beginning to speculate as to whether or not Klaes van Baarnheim was going to acknowledge his daughter. This affair would bring at least ten dinner invitations to the notary, everyone would want to hear his opinion on the affair. Oh, and wouldn't some people regret having neglected him up to now! He would certainly not accept any invitation from the Drogucerts. Better still, he would send his wife alone, and she would pretend to know nothing! As he sipped the beer, he surveyed the brewer and his daughter, wishing to note every smallest detail. The girl wasn't bad, though perhaps a little heavily built, a little of the peasant type; she looked a lot like her father. He had been prepared for more tears, more emotion,

more effusiveness, the sort of thing he had witnessed on many occasions of this kind. The brewer looked more pleased than she did. But obviously she must be very thrilled. A girl from the Triangle doesn't see herself placed in command of such a considerable fortune without experiencing some emotion. He felt it necessary to say a few words; besides, the beer made him feel expansive.

"I must say, this is one of the occasions when a notary can wholeheartedly congratulate himself," he said, pronouncing the words with relish. "There is nothing finer or more generous, Monsieur van Baarnheim, than this spontaneous gesture you are making, unless it be the character of the young girl who has known how to arouse so much affection. I have only to see your daughter, have only to note her grace and distinction, to be aware that the name of van Baarnheim, one of the oldest names in the trade world of this town that was founded by tradesmen. . . ."

His sentence, which he had so carefully prepared an hour before, and the wide gesture that accompanied it were cut short by the entrance of Philippe Brenner. Klaes frowned.

"I simply couldn't miss seeing this little ceremony," said Philippe. "Will you allow me, Uncle?" Whereupon he took a chair and sat down. "Please go on, Maître Zimmerman," he said, then. "I believe I interrupted you."

His eyes met Alberte's and he gave her a little smile. No, he held no grudge against her. He could even admire her pluck for not having given in to his advances of the previous day. She had succeeded; he could almost be amused at it. All the same, she must have experienced a few bad moments that night, after having been caught. She looked exhausted. The notary gave a little cough to attract attention.

"I was saying, my dear Brenner, how pleasant it is to be called upon in these circumstances. I was complimenting my client and his daughter on a decision that does honour to them both. And to see that you, such a close relative, want to be present for this little formality, adds still more to my legitimate satisfaction by proving how united this family remains. The name of van Baarnheim, one

of the most ancient names of the trade world of this town. . . .”

His resonant voice filled the bedroom like the humming of a big self-satisfied insect. Everyone looked pleased, thought Alberte: her father, the notary, and even Philippe, who could have been furious but had given her that mischievous little smile. She felt atrociously oppressed, as if clamped in a vice. She would never escape now, she knew it. This malaise was not a malady, it was something else. She had been caught in a trap, into which they had all lured her. They had made her believe that everything was simple and easy, but it wasn't true. They had made her believe that her mother would get well, and it seemed to her that her mother was dead. And now they were saying that she would marry Yves, and that, too, she was sure of it, would crumble like dust in her hands. She had come back to the painful uncertainty which had fettered her in the old days, in the Triangle, that doubt of everything. On the one hand there was the Triangle, with its detestable laughter, its hideous disorder, the lies and insanity of her mother; and on the other hand there was this weight she had for a time thought of as security and which was now crushing her. They were all triumphing over her: the Three Storks tavern-keeper who had not thought she was nice enough to the customers, her mother who secretly hated her, her father who questioned and questioned, and Philippe who smiled. How ever escape them?

“And now that I have pronounced the word ‘legitimate,’ perhaps it would be well that I produce my paper. . . .”

From his flat leather brief-case he drew out a blue cardboard folder.

“Let's see, my child. You were actually born on the. . . .”

“Yes,” said Alberte in a barely audible voice.

“... Daughter of Elsa-Marie Damiaen; registered as ‘of unknown paternity. . . .?’”

“Yes. But——”

The notary raised his head in some surprise.

“I beg pardon?”

“I would like . . . I would like to know. . . . Am I going to have to sign something?”

"No, my child, no. Your father could even acknowledge you without your authorization," said the notary with a laugh. "But I gather that is not the case. I was saying, then, Alberte Gwendoline. . . . Is that right?"

Gwendoline! Elsa had wanted that romantic second name, lifted out of some inept novel. Alberte still remembered a time when, to the amusement of everyone, Elsa called her "Gwen." Then she had suddenly stopped doing so; no doubt it was at that same time that she had stopped loving the little girl with the hard look in her eyes. After that, Elsa had always called her Bertha. And when she had come to live with her father, she had had to change her name again.

"Now, Monsieur van Baarnheim, if you will kindly initial each page, first of all, and then afterwards. . . ."

He was going towards the bed, but Alberte again stopped him. "I would like. . . ." she murmured.

A rather forced laugh came from the man in bed. "She's stupendous!" Klaes exclaimed. "Oh, you don't know my daughter, Maître Zimmerman! With that gentle little look of hers, she's terrifying! I give her my whole fortune, and she still wants something more! Come, don't worry. You shall have him, you shall have your little secretary. And my fortune to boot, if that's what you want to know. Maître Zimmerman. . . ."

But she still kept the notary from going on.

"It's just that, you see," she murmured, always coming up against the same obstacle, "it's just that I would not like to. . . ."

She did not know how to express herself. But the suddenly narrowed, suddenly fixed look in Klaes' eyes impelled her to go on.

"I don't want to take that money. I don't want. . . ."

The understanding laughter of the notary added to her confusion, and she covered her distraught face with her two hands.

"What childish nonsense, Mademoiselle! Doubtless an exaggerated scrupulousness impels you. . . . But think: this not only concerns a heritage but a name, which give you social advantages."

She still covered her face.

"I don't want. . . ." she said again, with stupid obstinacy. "I don't want . . . I. . . ."

"Well now," said the notary, "I cannot believe this. When it comes to the point of summoning a man of law. . . . You are making a spectacle of yourself in a quite unpleasant way, allow me to say so. If I am to believe your father, you wanted it. Is that not so, Monsieur van Baarnheim?"

He turned towards the bed and uttered a slight cry as if he had found himself confronting a repugnant animal. Noiselessly, subsiding upon himself like a parcel of tow, Klaes had fallen forward, and you might have taken that formless mass for a bundle of rags, had it not been for the singular sound, as of a death-rattle, that was coming from the invisible face.

"Oh, my God!" said the notary.

"Go down at once and fetch my cousin," said Philippe with sufficient calm. "If he is no longer there, then Dr. Franck, at the Paré Clinic."

The big man hurried out, looking flustered. Philippe went towards his uncle, lifted up the massive torso with some difficulty, and settled Klaes back on his pillows. Despite his closed eyes, he had apparently not totally lost consciousness, for his lips could be seen moving as if he were trying to mutter something.

"Well?" said Philippe, his voice shaking with anger, and bearing down upon Alberte almost threateningly, "is this what you wanted? It would be a good thing now, if he died without acknowledging you. Play-acting, are you? Filthy little actress! You had to defy me, did you? You had to show me what you can do, eh? To get a little more, you hoped to be pleaded with, like your mother? But what, for heaven's sake, do you want?"

Was it he, Philippe Brenner, who was swept with this unreal anger? What exasperated him was her silence, and her wounded, uncomprehending look, the look of an animal. She had only to say a word! He took another step towards her. Was it his hand that was raised and struck that young girl in the face? Was it his voice that choked in a muttering of confused words, imploring or threatening her, he was not sure which? Was it himself or was it his double that he saw far off in the depths of a mirror? And that mirror itself may have been a part of the nightmare, he would

never know, for the big notary came back, out of breath, asserting all his weighty human solidity and trying to reassure himself with the sound of his voice.

"He's coming, he's coming," said he, sinking heavily into an armchair. "Doubtless it's nothing?"

"Nothing," said Philippe.

Time passed.

"Hmm," the notary muttered, moving restlessly in his chair. "He's very long in coming, that doctor. All the same, I hope. . . ."

He cast an unquiet eye upon that mass of flesh that was noisily breathing, with shut eyes, like a weird machine. Then, unable to stand the silence, he turned towards Alberte, who had remained motionless, huddled in a corner, near the window.

"You see, Mademiselle, a simple word is sometimes enough to unleash catastrophes," he said pompously, and the sound of his own voice reassuring him, he went on still more forcefully. "You were, I am sure, only trying to express confusion at so much generosity in your regard? I confess it surprises me that my client seems to have taken it so much to heart."

He gave an embarrassed glance towards the bed. Could he use the word "client" for the gelatinous mass which seemed to be holding to life only by that thin thread of air which was being inhaled with such difficulty?

"I want to go away," said Alberte.

The notary gave her a shocked look.

"Go away? Why, Mademoiselle, only reflect, your father . . . I would not like to appear to be pessimistic, but after all, realize that your father is perhaps on the point of death!"

"Oh, I want to go away, away!" she said, almost sobbing.

Was she going to run off, without explanations, and forever? But a heavy step sounded on the stairs. A second later Dr. Franck burst into the room, importantly, his brows gathered in a frown, his long grey locks, as if blown in a stormy wind, in disarray over his Beethovenian forehead.

"Let's not get into a panic!" said he, even before approaching

the bed. "No panic! He is breathing. He will live. A tourniquet and a towel, if you please. We'll settle this!"

Without a greeting to anyone, his big hands at once got to work, kneading the mass of flesh stretched out on the bed as if it had been a mass of dough, rolling back the patient's eyelids, feeling the heart, punching the ribs, and finally dragging from the prostrate body a hoarse moan.

"Ah, ha! You see! He's reacting very well," he said with satisfaction, speaking to no one in particular.

He tossed back his hair with a dramatic gesture. But seeing that his audience was not sufficiently admiring him, he frowned again and addressed himself to the notary, who appeared to be the one most willing to listen—Philippe was calling for Suzanne on the stairway and Alberte was as if paralyzed, seeming to hear nothing. "What happened?" he asked shortly. "A quarrel? A strong emotion? Alcohol?"

"Well, you see," muttered the notary, whose tone had considerably lowered since the entrance of the man of science, "you see, er, it was a matter of drawing up the document whereby the young lady would be acknowledged as the daughter. And you see, er. . . ."

For the first time Dr. Franck seemed to notice Alberte's presence. He gave her a curt nod.

"Emotion, then. Before? After?"

"You see, I had brought the document already drawn up. And then just before the signature. . . ."

The doctor sized-up his patient with an expert look.

"He could sign," he said, suddenly amiable, almost chatty. "Don't you worry, Mademoiselle. In a few minutes he'll be in condition to sign."

He paused, seeing that Alberte did not seem to react to his words.

"I sympathize with your grief," he added brusquely.

Suzanne came in with a basin and towels, the hypodermic syringe that had been sterilized. They waited in silence. At the end of a few seconds, Dr. Franck looked up.

"There," he said. "You'll see, in a few seconds his breathing

will be easier, and you will be able to proceed, Maître Zimmermann. Clearly, I cannot keep him going indefinitely. The heart is fatigued, very fatigued. As I told him last night, they called me very late. Attended to earlier, the disease would have been curable. Oh, well. . . . Might I wash my hands?"

Suzanne opened the door of the washroom.

"Mademoiselle," said the notary to Alberte, "May I know if you intend to keep to your resolve? From what I know of my client, and considering the state he is in, I'd say he'll not very likely try to sway you."

"I don't want. . . ." she said in the same stubborn way.

Dr. Franck had reappeared in the doorway of the washroom, still wiping his hands on a towel, drawn by curiosity.

"So there's a dispute?" said he, in a much more condescending way. "Monsieur van Baarnheim still hesitates?"

"Why, not at all, dear Doctor!" said the notary, who had recovered his self-assurance. "On the contrary, it is the young lady—and I confess I cannot understand what prompts her—it is the young lady who refuses, in the most categorical fashion, to accept the generous——"

"Oh? That's curious. In effect, very curious," said the doctor, staring at Alberte with interest. "I thought that, in any case, an acknowledgment was made, how shall I say, automatically?"

"Well, you see, Doctor," said the notary, radiant at being consulted, "legally, the opposition of the daughter does not count, of course. But the moral effect was considerable and most surely was not foreign to the crisis which occurred."

"Curious, very curious," the doctor repeated. "And may one ask, Mademoiselle, what reasons dictated your conduct? Oh, this is in no way an inquisition—which nothing, moreover, could justify—but sometime a physician can arrange many things which are thought to be hopeless."

"Yes," the notary cut in, rather jealous of the importance the doctor gave himself. "If I may say, Mademoiselle, you have before you two men of experience and maturity (the doctor gathered his impressive brows in a frown, for he still maintained pretensions

to a certain charm) and if we could assist you by our advice. it would be with joy that. . . ."

"Come, now, what's the trouble?" Dr. Franck resumed. "You have some scruples? You're afraid of not knowing how to run your father's business? Perhaps you have a bad recollection associated with money, an association that paralyzes you? Reasonably, nothing can explain——"

Philippe suddenly interrupted. He had recovered his calm, so he thought. To urge Alberte to accept was the only way of making her persist in her refusal, he reasoned, with the apparent lucidity one has in a fever. But why did he at the same time want her to accept?

"Alberte, it's ridiculous," he said with astonishing conviction. "Since you can marry the man of your choice! I will take charge of your affairs, you'll be relieved of all care. . . ."

"Come, now," said the other two men, almost simultaneously,

Alberte said nothing. She had retrieved her childhood obstinacy. She would take refuge in silence. It seemed to her that only in this way could she elude them. She was no longer reasoning or trying to understand. She wanted only to escape.

"All the same, I would like to know on what point the subject turns," said the notary impatiently. "If the document is not signed, I have some clients who. . . ."

A sound issuing from the bed cut him short. Klaes van Baarnheim had opened his eyes, his dry lips were uttering a moan which became an almost threatening summons.

"Alberte!"

"Ah! The hypo is having its effect," said Dr. Franck with satisfaction. "Oh, he'll hold out a good half hour now."

The notary made a shocked gesture, fearing that Klaes might have heard. But the old man was looking only at Alberte, who now, with lowered eyes, was approaching the bed.

"Ingrate!" said Klaes in a voice that was suddenly very distinct. "Ingrate! All my life I have done you nothing but good, and this is my recompense!"

The heavy, purplish eyelids seemed more swollen, more repulsive

than usual. His congested face, on which enormous veins stood out, looked like the face of some monstrous animal.

"I pulled her out of the slime," he said almost in a whisper. "Without me, she'd only be a tavern-wench, a prostitute, maybe! I've given her everything, an education, clothes, everything she wanted. Isn't that so, Philippe? I did my duty, my whole duty. And here she is. . . . Say it, speak out, what did I ever refuse you? Your mother. I pay the clinic two hundred francs a day to attend to her. And all those rotten people you recommended to my kindness, didn't I do what you wanted for them?"

His eyes seemed to stray on the ceiling, and he said with a certain bitterness—but to whom was he speaking?—"Three hundred thousand francs to the hospitals; charity, ten thousands francs a week, gifts, too many to count. My sister's allowance. I'll help Philippe to settle a dowry on Louise. Artists. I've helped all of them, they'll tell you so. I don't have my accounts at hand, but. . . ."

He lowered his eyes and once more surveyed the bowed form of Alberte. With unforeseen energy, he sat up. And he began to speak in a wheedling, wily voice, interrupted only from time to time by a sudden wheezing which made him fall back on his pillow to catch his breath, struggling with all his old fighter's energy.

"Let's argue this. You don't want, you don't want. That's easily said. You know that I could . . . yes, without your opinion, Maître Zimmerman has told you so. But I play square. I'll not force you. Stop and think. You and I, we've always got along, haven't we? You took pleasure in the money I gave you. You put some money aside. And you accepted the dowry I promised to settle on you. That was why you hid your little love affair from me. Well, then? You're my daughter, after all."

The possessive word rang out in the silent room like a challenge.

"If you refuse what I'm now offering, you'll always have that. You'll not touch it? Yes, you'll stand out for a month, perhaps, or two months. And then what? Go back to being a waitress in a tavern? Finish up like your mother? With the education I gave you? You'd not be able to, even if you tried! Well then, well then?"

His voice swelled, triumphant, despite the tightness in his chest

and despite his failing breath. He was fighting his last battle, he who had never lost. It was not the moment, now, to ask for whom or against what he was fighting. He had to win the battle, that was all. His loud and powerful voice drowned the obstinate little voice that was trying to say something.

"You don't want to go back to where you came from," he said, panting as if he were struggling against a high sea. "You don't live as they do, you don't speak as they do any more, and rest assured they know you're the one that had your mother locked up! Every little gesture of yours, your voice, the voice you have now, cry aloud that you're my daughter. You're like me. Dress like them, amuse yourself like them? You'd not be able to, ever. You can't refuse this money. It's yours. It's yours!"

He paused to catch his breath. With his clenched hand, he held the edge of the chair on which she had sat down.

"I will not take the money. I will marry Yves," she said, almost calmly.

There was a cracking sound: the wood of the chair had yielded under the powerful hand.

"You'll not marry him. I know him like the inside of my pocket. He's a scrounger, he's a fellow born for bankruptcy and a bullet through his head. It's in his blood. His father's exactly like him. And you believe he'd risk marrying a girl without a penny? He'll take to his heels, mark me. Few brains and no nerve; a pretty toy for a rich girl. No, not that either, you'd not be able to afford the luxury."

She said nothing, but her lowered head, showing only its dark hair, again made a negative sign.

"You need this money, Alberte. You won't exist without it, or without me. I give it as I've given you everything, everything. When you came here, you didn't even know how to talk or how to sit at table. You poured wine into the soup, do you remember?"

He laughed, with superb cruelty, inhaling the air, brutally. With ten minutes more the battle would be won, he reflected, and he experienced that beneficent warmth that always preceded his

victories. He remained quiet for a moment, his eyes brooding upon his miserable prey.

"Poor Alberte!" he said suddenly with a kind of tenderness in his voice. "You don't want, you don't want! You didn't want, either, when you first arrived here, to be called Alberte, do you remember? 'I'm called Bertha', you said, remember. 'I'm called Bertha, I'm called Bertha'. You didn't say anything else for a week. And now. . . ."

His voice swelled anew, contemptuous, triumphant, and at the same time wheedling.

"And now you *are* Alberte. And in a minute you'll be Alberte van Baarnheim, my daughter! Maître Zimmerman, enough of this hemming and hawing. Can you bring me that document and give me a pen: We'll do what's good for this stupid girl in spite of herself."

A little self-consciously, the notary approached the invalid's bedside, casting anxious glances at him and at Alberte. Klaes, in a wash of sweat, had fallen back upon his pillows again, his lips puckered in a smile. Alberte was shivering, but was otherwise motionless, her arms clasped over her breast.

"Here, sir, is the document. Will you glance over it?"

Klaes tried to raise himself up, but fell back again. Gasping for breath, he could not articulate a word, but with a wave of the hand indicated that he wanted a pen.

"Here's my pen," the notary muttered, lowering his eyes. The spectacle was singularly painful to him; for several minutes he had been struggling against a growing nausea. Slowly Klaes' hand, which seemed afflicted with sudden heaviness, rose up and grasped the pen.

"Here, sir, here."

The hand dropped too abruptly. A spreading ink stain showed on the sheet where the pen had torn it.

"Hold his hand," said Philippe.

Alberte's hand rose up, hovered a moment over the sheet of paper, gently grasped it, rumpled it as if absent-mindedly, then tore it across in the midst of the silence. After which, as if unexpectedly

terrified at her own gesture, she fled towards the door. Dr. Franck caught her on the threshold.

"You can boast of having done a good job of it," he said in a hard voice. "You've killed him. Yes. Look at him! Look at him, will you!"

In effect, Klaes van Baarnheim was floundering on his pillows in an atrocious suffocation, holding the terrified notary's arm in a powerful grip.

"Tell him you accept!" hissed the doctor. "Your attitude is criminal! Tell him you accept, and he will die in peace. You'll be none the less free to do what you will. But make haste!"

He released her, convinced that she would go towards her father, but instead, the minute she was free, she had flung herself out of the room and was already running down the stairs. They could hear the street door bang. Dr. Franck shrugged.

"Another tube," he said to Suzanne, as he went towards the bed and liberated the notary.

Maître Zimmerman at once bounded into the bathroom, from which came a loud sound of vomiting.

Philippe had stood motionless throughout this entire scene. The doctor now addressed him.

"Draw near, sir. Your presence may perhaps calm him a little."

"I doubt it," Philippe managed to say. His throat was tight. Where was she going? Insane. She was insane.

"I understand your emotion," said Dr. Franck. "Really! That girl's attitude! Think of it, all she had to say was one word. She must be a little, er, abnormal, don't you think? Quite often these children of alcoholics are. My daughter is treating the girl's mother. An interesting psychiatric case. Ah, ha! He's come to again. What strength there is in this man! It's rather fantastic, for after the effort he has just made, I'll confess, I expected to see him carried off in the wink of an eye. How unfortunate that he was not correctly attended to sooner. His body is cut out to live a hundred years. Only the heart is fatigued. Very emotional, no doubt, under his hail-fellow-well-met exterior. I say, look at his lips? He's trying to

say something again. And he's going to manage it, the blighter! Oh, they don't make men like this nowadays!"

"Philippe," said Klaes, very low.

"Yes, Uncle?"

"I want to give you everything, everything. Nothing to my sister or to Roger. They've been—they don't deserve it. Let them die of envy! Is he there, the notary?"

"I'll fetch him, I'll fetch him," said the doctor hurriedly.

Klaes van Baarnheim stared suspiciously at his nephew.

"You accept, Philippe?" he muttered. "You accept everything?"

"Why, yes, Uncle. Yes," said Philippe impatiently.

He wanted terribly to know what had become of Alberte. And supposing she had gone! Gone! Would he then never know what had become of her?

"I've never asked anything of anybody," said Klaes. "Never. And I'll not begin today. Did she perhaps imagine that I'd implore her? Never. No one. I'm not afraid. Never asked anything of anybody."

And yet it was indeed a request that the proud old man was making, when he asked again, in an almost shamed voice, "You'll take everything, Philippe? You'll take everything upon yourself?"

"Yes," said Philippe, without even listening, without even comprehending this supreme agony, the need for deliverance, and without comprehending the weight that was going to fall upon his shoulders.

The notary, very pale, a handkerchief held over his mouth, approached.

"Here's a paper, sir, in not very legal form, but after all . . . Dr. Franck and Suzanne will act as witnesses."

"The pen," requested the brewer, in a barely audible voice.

As he lowered his hand, he cast an anxious glance towards Philippe, as if he feared to see Alberte's refusal repeated, and despite his preoccupation, Philippe remarked the strangeness of that humbly imploring look on a face so proud.

"Sign, sign, Uncle Klaes," he said with vague pity. "Have no fear. I'm with you."

With an effort, the brewer managed to form each letter of his name.

"There, you'll be able to rest now," said Dr. Franck, with professional kindness, helping him down on his back.

"He has such a fund of resources, the blighter," said the doctor to Philippe, "that I don't absolutely despair of him yet. Sometimes a psychological appeasement. . . ."

A hoarse sigh made them turn round. The brewer's eyes were wide open, strangely wide, and filled with an expression of singular astonishment.

"She didn't want it," Klaes said in a low voice, but very distinctly. "She didn't want it. Why. . . .?"

His lips moved again. He seemed to be making a supreme effort, his eyes staring, still with that same astonished expression, at the ceiling.

"Doctor!" said the notary in a choked voice. "Can it be that. . . .?"

Dr. Franck laid his hand on his patient's chest.

"Why, yes, by Jove!" he said, with a smile of apology. "Like a shot! Well, there you have sufficient proof that science is not infallible. At least we, her modest servants, are aware of it. Poor man! He wasted his efforts. We'll draw up the death-certificate. Monsieur Brenner, would you care to. . . .?"

But Philippe had already left the room.

"What crazy heirs!" said the doctor, irritably. "They spend their time running after each other on the stairway, so it would seem".

"Oh, I saw at once there was something between those two," said the notary, smugly. His colour was returning to his face, but he still avoided looking at the corpse. "Who knows! They may even have cooked up that rejection-stuff to get rid of poor old Klaes van Baarnheim quicker!"

Despite his contemptuous airs, the doctor was interested.

"You think so? Clearly, the conduct of that girl can't be understood, otherwise. Refuse such a fortune? She'd have to be insane! And please note, she may be. I observed her during the scene, and

her look of prostration, her dilated pupils made me suspect something of the sort. It's in these temperaments apparently robust that disconcerting mental troubles most often establish themselves."

"I don't have much belief in mental troubles when it comes to money," said the notary. "Believe me, they wanted to get rid of the old brewer. A strong emotion sufficed, you said so yourself."

They went towards the door.

"Yes," the doctor said as he went down the stairs, "but what was the reason for him to get so excited when he saw that she refused? What could that do to him, the old blighter? I'd never have thought him so sentimental. These old sharks sometimes have some quite surprising vestiges of emotion tucked away."

"Yes," sighed the notary. "'Why?'—as he said. A beautiful death on an interrogation point."

"I'd willingly bet it was the first one in his life," said the doctor, smilingly. "Poor soul! It was about time."

On the doorstep, they shook hands.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“**W**HERE’S Mademoiselle Alberte?” Philippe asked Suzanne, at the bottom of the stairs.
“In the garden, I think.”

He ran there, did not see her, then, recalling the tool-shed, drew near it noiselessly.

“I was sure of it,” said Yves ragefully. “We’re sunk! What an old. . . . My poor dear, that must have been a blow! So, they’re the ones who’ll. . . . It’s really too bad! But it was bound to happen.”

She said nothing, clinging to him, gradually resuscitating from that frightful blackout of her reason from which she had thought never to emerge entirely sane. Was she saved? She could hear the quickened beating of Yves’ heart. •

“What shall we do, what shall we do? Darling! Don’t you think you ought to go back there? Perhaps there’s still a hope?”

Without drawing away from him, she shook her head. She did not want to think or reflect any more. She renounced everything, except to be there, clinging to him, in that protective warmth.

“Alberte! He wasn’t. . . . Is he dead?”

With a great effort, she wrenched back to reality.

“Not yet,” she said, speaking in a low voice. It seemed to her she would never be able to raise her voice again.

“Well, then, you must go back to the house, darling! Alberte, I beg of you!”

His voice shook, he was beginning to tremble, and already there

was that furrow in his jaw that she knew so well and regarded with such tender pity. But she was incapable of doing anything more. She did not even hear the light step that passed near the tool-shed.

"I'll take you as far as the door if you're afraid to go alone. At the point he's reached now, there's no danger of anyone gossiping to him about us any more. But hurry. Perhaps he's still able to sign his name, you never know. Some dying people. . . ."

He had put his arm around her waist, but she refused to let herself be drawn away, wanting still to cling to him, to try to forget and to make him forget everything that was happening around them. He released her. For one thing, there was little strength in his trembling arm. She let herself sink down upon the old trunk at the back of the shed. He knelt beside her, trying to be calm, trying to be gentle, but frantic at the thought of how time was passing, of how the old man up there in the house was perhaps dying, and of all that money that, as far as he was concerned, was going up in smoke. With misgivings, he felt his nerves reaching a tension that was all too familiar; he was in the grip of that impotent wrath which always ended in tears. And it was the first time that, far from consoling him, she was stirring up this odious weakness of his. Yet she knew quite well the plans he was making, and all the calamities he had suffered time and again.

"Alberte," he said in a feverish voice, "do it for me. You know that I'll marry you in any event, but it would be so much better, so much easier. . . ."

"But I was the one that didn't want it."

Her voice was singularly calm in the midst of the silence. On the other side of the partition, where the wood was stored, a log cracked.

"Who didn't want what?" (He would never be able to understand).

"The money."

She was calm, calm, as though she had been put to sleep. Or perhaps it was someone on the other side of the thin partition wall who was bearing the burden of anguish at that moment?

"What money, for heaven's sake?"

"Of . . . of that man. . . . She made a vague gesture, towards the house.

"You don't mean—you don't mean to say that it's—*on purpose*? You're out of your mind, and you'll drive me crazy, too! Now, let's see. He didn't want to give you the money at the last minute. Right? I saw the notary go past. He went upstairs, didn't he?"

With exasperated patience, he acted as though he were teaching the alphabet to a child.

"Yes."

"Right. Well then, what happened afterwards?"

"Afterwards," she replied obediently, "I couldn't."

"Couldn't what?"

"Take the money."

It was clear, at last. She felt his arm around her shoulders become slack.

"You—you mean to say that for his part he really wanted you to have it and that you——"

"Yes," she said in the same calm way as before.

He wiped his forehead. A vein at his temple was throbbing hard. He was sure he was going insane.

"You don't know what you're saying. It's impossible. You didn't do *that* to me!"

Did his muffled voice reassure Alberte? She leaned eagerly towards him.

"Yves, try to understand. I couldn't. It wasn't on purpose to hurt you, I just couldn't, Yves."

"You couldn't let him do as he liked? Why not?"

He was still speaking in the same dull, toneless voice. When he and his father had left the luxurious house to live in the room near the warehouses, he had been only ten years old. He remembered how they had braced themselves like this. But this new blow was even harder to suffer. And she, upon whom he had built everything, she was hesitating, trying to find words, unable to find a way to express her sudden terror in the presence of that death which was so unlike any other. The fear she had felt, when confronting that man, now dead, who had wanted to take, always to take, while

she had each day become more like a prisoner. Her instinctive recoil at that offer which resembled a trap, how explain it? She had wanted to flee, that was all. She had been afraid. Was Yves incapable of understanding?

"But afraid of what? Afraid! Insane and stupid girl! If you'd loved me. . . ."

He had lost control of himself. Burying his face in his hands he burst into a dry sobbing, furiously repelling her timid embrace.

In the obscurity of the wood-shed, leaning against the piles of logs, Philippe listened. Surely, he thought, Yves would not abandon her that day, not at once, not at this time when she had understood nothing and had lost everything. "Understood nothing . . . understood nothing." That was the phrase she repeated with pathetic obstinacy. She excused herself, asked for time to catch her breath and get her bearings. She was talking fast now, in short and broken phrases, no doubt less with a view to explaining herself than to postpone the moment she must foresee, when Yves would get up from his knees.

"I don't know what got into me. He was so solemn, so sure. He despised us all, you know that, you said it yourself once. He was going to die, and he thought that everything was like that, I mean, in a way that was false. And mamma's like that now, too. Simple, and . . . as if she was dead, Yves! You understand, don't you? Oh, you do understand?"

Naturally he understood nothing. How could he understand? What had he to understand, anyway? Poor child, poor lost child giving in to heaven only knew what ridiculous pride, what need for revenge, perhaps? And to some fear, too. She herself didn't understand. "I don't know what got into me," she said. O, heart-rending voice of humility, like a servant suddenly overcome with a slight dizziness which causes her to let a glass fall and break. "Simple, and as if dead." Yes, they were all dead, had been dead for a very long time. What did it matter? But she had been afraid.

"My poor child," thought Philippe, as he sat listening in the dim wood-shed, and he felt a kind of tenderness. "My poor, stupid child, banging your head against a wall and thinking you're

proving something. Perhaps I'm the only one who can understand a little of what you yourself do not understand."

On the other side of the partition wall, there was a silence, then a slight cry.

"Yves!"

There was a sound of retreating footsteps.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," said the young fellow, as if steadying himself with an effort.

"You're not leaving me, Yves?" she whispered.

There was a silence. Was he hesitating before going, or merely hesitating before speaking?

"You know quite well," he said in a still harder voice, "that if something dreadful had happened, if you'd fallen ill, or no matter what, I'd have married you without a penny. But this way. . . ." His voice broke, he had to catch his breath. But now, he must strike quickly and cruelly, if he was not to collapse again.

"I don't love you! I've never loved you. I think you're stupid, I was making a game of you." He was speaking very rapidly. "I'd have married you for your money or for your good health, yes, I know, I've said the contrary, but it was a lie, a lie. I've never loved you."

Suddenly he struck something with his fist.

"And we had it!" he almost sobbed. "We had everything, the house, the money, we were going to marry, we were safe for ever!"

Never, never again, now, would he escape his fear. Pitilessly she had cast him back into it. Let him avenge quickly before again finding himself alone.

"You're nothing but a mad woman, like your mother. You'll be a drunk, like her, a human wreck. You were fed up with acting nice and using self-control. You slept with me as you'd have slept with any man. You. . . ."

Philippe was well acquainted with that rage to destroy and wreak havoc, he knew the feeling with which Yves was suddenly possessed. And what lovelier prey than Alberte, than that splendid body thus humiliated, than that dark soul so easily driven to cry

mercy. The pleasure of children when torturing animals, the enjoyment of executioners, of masters, of lovers too much loved. He knew it, he had felt it, he even reflected that perhaps not everything in what Yves said was false, and yet a part of himself was suffering and bleeding and struggling with her a little more each minute.

"Never again will I be able to take you in my arms, knowing what you've done to me, when I had confidence in you. Yes, I was that stupid. Never again will I have one single thought for you."

Nothing. Nothing remained to her. Philippe knew it before she did. For, with Yves gone, what remained to her? "And all this is so useless, so entirely useless." Klaes had died in agony. Elsa would live in misery. Of what use would all this be? "My poor, poor child," Philippe almost said aloud, but he suffered with her nevertheless. All desire for her had left him long ago. All desire had left him.

A heavy footstep could be heard going away through the garden. Alone in the shed, she did not weep. Doubtless she did not yet fully understand. And Philippe and Alberte were there, with a wall between them, each motionless, each plunged into the deepest silence of the soul. This lasted for a very long time, without beginning or end, an infinite time of despair and peace. Then Philippe heard her stand up, heard her footstep at the door of the shed, heard the rustling of her skirt. She went off towards the house. Shortly afterwards he left the shed, too, and behind her he crossed the drawing-room of the house, the silent hall, opened noiselessly the street door which she had shut behind her.

He looked out into the street. She was going slowly away. She had thrown a shawl around her shoulders in the way many women of the quarter did, working-class women on their way home. She resembled them all. And was she not one of them? Or would she not be, some day? Would he not find her waiting at table in some dive or other? Or perhaps a salesgirl in a store, or an office employee, or a dish-washer. Peaceful and calm, perhaps. Perhaps moderately happy, recalling only one feature of this absurd ad-

venture, her "disappointment in love," as women say: . . . having forgotten everything of this day when she had been more alone than anyone in the world. Having played her rôle, her little rôle in the world's economy, without having understood its significance.

For a moment, as she stopped at the corner of the street, he was tempted to run after her, to tell her that she had not borne this weight of solitude to no purpose. But of what use would that be? And perhaps she would even suspect an additional mockery? He had to stand there, watching her out of sight, taking away nothing in her hands but this ridiculous victory, nothing but her useless renouncement. Useless? Despite the cold, he remained motionless, his gaze clinging to the brown splotch made by her shawl at the corner of the street. Then, apparently coming to a decision, she plunged down courageously between the shuttered houses, in the darkness. She turned the corner of the street and disappeared.

In the house they were calling for him, looking for him. But he did not stir, having forever left the tumult, and even when jostled by a passer-by he remained there motionless, insensible to his surroundings, a tear running down his devastated face, corrupt, but saved, perhaps.